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OSIRIS PUBLICATIONS
and
THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER
present

THE
SACRIFICIAL
KING



1991

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THE SACRIFICIAL KING is a special presentation of **THE SONIC SCREWDRIIVER** and is intended solely for the enjoyment of fans of fantasy and science fiction, most particularly in the genre of British television's "Robin of Sherwood," and for all those who understand the concept of the Sacrificial King.

Submissions and letters of comment are both encouraged and welcomed. Correspondence requiring a reply should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. All correspondence will be considered for publication unless clearly noted otherwise. All submissions and correspondence should be addressed to **THE SACRIFICIAL KING**, c/o OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053.

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FROM THE EDITOR:

You hold in your hands a very special publication. Instead of the regular issue of THE SONIC SCREWDRIIVER you probably expected from us, this year OSIRIS Publications is proud to present THE SACRIFICIAL KING, a collection of invitation-only stories with a common theme.

Two people, neither of them in any way associated with OSIRIS Publications, are to a large degree responsible for what you are about to read. To Richard "Kip" Carpenter, we owe the lovingly and carefully created story, tone, and mood of ROBIN OF SHERWOOD. And to Katherine Kurtz, a professional writer of fantasy and science fiction, we owe a special debt for the inspiration of our theme. In a magnificently crafted novel called Lamas Night, she brought the idea of the Divine Sacrifice to our attention, and made it live. Without the inspiration of these two, we freely confess we would never have undertaken this project.

The stories that follow are all drawn from the ROBIN OF SHERWOOD universe -- but the Sacrificial King belongs to no one science fiction/fantasy media universe, for it is a concept more truly drawn from the history of our world.

The King is tied to the land; the health and well-being of the land are reflected in the health and well-being of the King. And if the land -- and its people -- fail, if they grow weak and sick, that must be because the King is weak, and sick, and failing. And only the willing, knowing sacrifice of the King (or his equally high-ranking substitute) can restore the land and its people to health again.

Jesus of Nazareth, "King of the Jews" and Son of God -- God Incarnate... From other religions: Osiris, Tammuz, Mithras...

From the history of England, where the concept has long been well-known: William Rufus, son of the Conqueror... Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and close friend of King Henry II...

And from British legend: King Arthur... Robin of Loxley, Robin Hood...

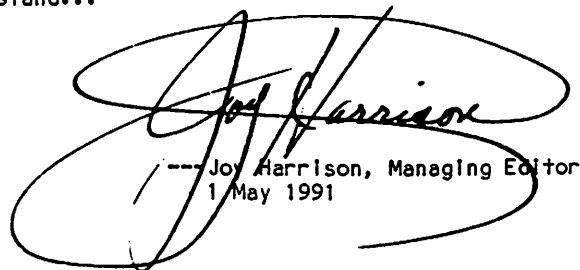
The list can be drawn from the great figures of history, or from the figures of legend. And it can extend into more modern times. What of John F. Kennedy? Might he not be the nearest thing to a "divine king" the United States has ever known? Wasn't he loved and adored by many? And might his death not have been a sacrifice for his "kingdom," for his people?

Why did John Kennedy go to Dallas at a time when his popularity in the South was far from high? Why did Thomas Becket not resist the knights who slaughtered him before the altar of his own cathedral? Why did Jesus of Nazareth go so willingly to His crucifixion?

Whether we as individuals believe in the Goddess and Her Consort, whether we believe in the Divine Marriage, whether we believe in the Sacrificial King Himself -- it is not important for the purposes of this publication. It is enough that the characters in the stories believe, and that they -- and we -- understand the meaning of the King and His death, both for themselves and for the world around them.

And so we offer you these stories, written by three women of distinctly different backgrounds and beliefs, who do not know each other, but who do know and understand the concept of the Divine Sacrifice, each in her own way. Our stories reflect four different points of view -- Robin of Loxley, Robert of Huntingdon, Edward of Wickham, and Marion of Sherwood. We welcome you to read them, and try to understand...

Blesséd be.



--- Joy Harrison, Managing Editor
1 May 1991



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FROM THE AUTHORS: LINDA RUTH PFONNER

"The August King" was written for many reasons. I am a pagan myself, and I have always been fascinated by the concept of the voluntary human sacrifice. Weren't you always amazed when you read of the Aztecs, who kept their sacrifices standing in line all day for their turn on the altar? What sort of faith does it take for a person to volunteer for such a bloody death? And how do the worshippers perceive the ritual? I know from my own experience that a ritual described afterwards cannot explain what happens during it, for the physical and mental aspects are only part of what happens. Words cannot adequately portray what happens on the spiritual level; we do not have the words for it.

Western European tradition has long preserved the concept of the Corn King, the vegetation god who was slain every year at harvest and eaten on the thanksgiving table. James G. Fraser's The Golden Bough is the most exhaustive treatment of the subject. August 1st, the feast of Lammas (Hlat-mass in Old West Saxon; i.e., the Feast of Bread) was the traditional occasion for the sacrifice.

The concept of King-Sacrifice, especially in Britain, is as old as the legends of the Craft, and were placed before the public by Margaret Murray when she published The God of the Witches in 1931. She believed the pagans of Britain had long held that the health of the King is intimately tied to the land; when one is infertile, for example, so is the other. There may be an echo of this in the stories of political unrest during King John's time. The people called him Lackland before he was crowned; he was a younger son with few prospects. Afterward, they called him Softsword, an unmistakably sexual insult, and linked his perceived incapacity to the country's falling economy.

Murray believed, and presented fascinating evidence, that King William Rufus, the Conqueror's son, was killed as a sacrifice. He died on "the morrow of Lammas" in the year 1100, slain by an arrow from the bow of his best friend, William Tyrrel. It was passed off, without any argument, as a hunting accident. There is convincing evidence that Rufus knew he was going to die, and equally convincing argument that he himself was of the Old Religion, and no kind of Christian. Murray allowed that Rufus was the only example she could find of a King fulfilling the sacrifice himself, acknowledging that he usually found a substitute. She held out Thomas à Becket as the substitute for King Henry II, and then branched out, claiming that Joan of Arc and her champion Gilles de Rais each in turn stood as the sacrifice for the French King.

The story fits the Robin Hood legend too well to be ignored. Robin's legend is entwined with King Richard and King John, so we know when he lived. In this particular version of the story, Allric of Loxley, the bearer of the Silver Arrow, is the pagans' King of the Wood, and makes the perfect substitute for the real King. Murray said Becket was chosen as Henry's substitute because he was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time -- the highest ranking religious in the land. Rufus's constant disagreements with Anselm, his own Archbishop of Canterbury, may have sprung from Anselm's refusal to play the substitute; in the end, Rufus had no substitute, and had to play the part himself. In Robin's time, to the pagan population, perhaps the King of the Wood was their local substitute.

Argument that the pagans had no interest in John's health are short-sighted; the people may not have liked their King, but he held a supernatural position. His health was inextricably linked to the health of the land. If the King-Sacrifice could keep the King healthy, the land would benefit, and vice versa.

This story was written because a pagan friend once challenged me to write a Corn King story; she had faith that I could do a creditable job. Once suggested, the story took well over four years to conceive and construct, and I agonized over how to make the story happen without compromising anyone's honour. I hope I have succeeded, and I hope you enjoy it.

If you are interested in checking my research, The God of the Witches is available in paperback from The Oxford University Press; it's listed under Sociology, Gods help us! The OUP number for it is GB 332; the ISBN number is 0-19-501270-4. If you have trouble ordering it, try your local occult bookshop; almost every major city has at least one.

And blessed be, all!



"The August King"
(By Linda Ruth Pfonner)

The little black mare ambled down the forest trail, head bobbing, tail switching away the flies. She wore a simple rope headstall and no saddle. On her back sat a young man with long, straight, dark hair and a level, direct regard. He plainly was not a skilled rider, and the lack of a saddle did not make his task any easier, despite the bolster-like pack behind him. The healing wound in his thigh didn't help, either.

It had been only days since Robin of Sherwood was rescued from Nottingham Castle through the cooperation of followers both within and without the city [Ed. note: See "Tangled in Holly" by Linda Ruth Pfonner, THE SONIC SCREWDRIIVER #4, 1988.], but with the help of the herbwoman Maude, he was well on the road to recovery. Walking any distance was still painful, however, so they had kept the mare, alone of the horses stolen in the escape, in order for him to more easily accompany his friends in their incessant wanderings through Sherwood.

Just now, Robin and his wife Marion were heading toward Wickham. Lammas was only days away, and they needed to plan for it. The rest of the tiny band of outlaws were out in the woods, foraging for supplies for the feast. Lammas was Festival of the First Fruits, but the feast could not be allowed to deplete the villagers' stores for the coming winter. Meat, especially, was more easily had now, while the spring's crop of young deer and other animals was foolish with inexperience and fat with the summer's bounty. Harvest plenty could be had in the forest, too -- the first nuts were ripening, and the first apples and pears were ready. Everyone would meet at Wickham with their finds, and feast preparations would begin.

The young couple reached the edge of the forest outside Wickham Common at sunset, just as Robin had planned. He reined in the mare, and Marion, afoot beside him, stopped, too. He studied the village intently, making no move to leave the shelter of the wood.

"Robin?"

"Hmmm?"

"What are you looking for?"

He glanced down at her soberly. "Normans."

"Not in our village?!"

"Where more likely?" was his realistically bitter response. "The Sheriff knows our ties to Wickham. He'd be a fool not to have men here."

"Does he know it's Lammas?"

"How could he not? I've no mind to walk into his hands again so soon."

There was no possible argument. They were in basic agreement in this, as in most things. Robin continued to study the village as sunset deepened to twilight. There was no evidence of any strangers, and the people seemed carefree and unafraid. At last, he tickled the mare's ribs with his toe, and she started forward. Marion followed.

They were halfway across the Common before anyone saw them. Then several children came running out to meet them, vying for the privilege of holding the mare's head and leading her into the village.

Edward, headman of Wickham, met them at the centre of the small collection of huts, and held the mare himself so Robin could dismount. Then he let the children take the horse so he could hug the younger man hard.

"When we heard you'd been captured, we feared the worst. A messenger from Nottingham came to tell us you had escaped, but when we didn't hear from you, we feared..."

Robin pushed the older man to arm's length, touched at the sight of unshed tears in the Saxon's blue eyes. "I'm fine, Edward. I didn't have any way to send to you..."

The headman nodded. "I know. And ill news has wings. I knew we'd have heard if the word was bad. But still, we feared for you."

The young outlaw studied him intently, and after a moment, the villager looked away. "What's wrong, Edward?"

The man gave up all attempts at pretense. "We did receive a message. Not from Nottingham, or from you, but..."

"From where, then?"

"From Brideswell."

Robin froze for a moment, then smiled gently. "Is that what's unnerved you so?"

He nodded, biting his lip, searching the other man's face for some evidence that he had, somehow, been mistaken.

"What was the message?"

"A boy brought it."

The outlaw glanced at Edward's son Matthew, who was clinging to his father's side as if to some safe anchorage in a wild sea. "What did he say?"

"The Lady of Brideswell invites you to Lammas."

The concept obviously upset him, but Marlon didn't understand why so innocuous a statement should so disturb their friend. Robin, on the other hand, was not disturbed at all; he stood where he was, all his weight on his uninjured leg, nodding pensively. "Brideswell for Lammas..." he mused.

"Robin!" Edward exclaimed. "You can't be thinking of going..."

The younger man turned guileless eyes on him. "Why not?"

"It's Lammas..."

"I know."

"You know who you are..."

"Yes," Robin nodded. "Don't deny me this, Edward."

He blanched. "You haven't been Called...?"

The outlaw smiled gently, and shook his head. "No."

"Then why go?"

"Because the Lady invited me."

The shaggy blond head shook slowly. "I don't like it."

"I see that."

"I don't like her, either."

"She's a perfectly nice person, Edward," Robin chided gently.

The other man gritted his teeth. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, and I know it's because you love me. But that's no reason to hate the Lady of Brideswell."

"Isn't it?"

"Edward..."

"Well, at least don't go alone! Wait for Will and Nasir..."

"And me!" Marion interrupted, moving closer to her husband's side.

He put an arm around her, taking some of the strain off his injured leg, leaning on her. "Of course. How could I go without you? Besides, you've never been to Brideswell. You'll like the Lady."

"Will she, Robin?" Edward's tone was bleak.

"Certainly." His voice was clear and calm. "But Will and the others have been looking forward to celebrating Lammas here, with you. It wouldn't be kind to drag them away. Will hasn't had a good roaring drunk in weeks."

"Robin..." The headman seemed disposed to argue, but the outlaw held up one hand and forestalled him.

"Edward, please, trust me."

"I trust you. I don't trust her."

"Will you please explain this to me?" Marion spoke up. "Who is the Lady of Brideswell?"

Edward folded his arms. "Go ahead. Explain it to her."

Robin smiled at the challenge in the older man's voice. "Just as we know that Herne is a god and a man, so the Lady of Brideswell is a woman, but she is also the Great Goddess, Mother of All Things. Wherever there are men, there must be women, or there is nothing. Brideswell is the other half of what Sherwood is. She is the other half of Herne."

This was the first hint she'd had of such practices among her friends, and the Christian-born Marion was instantly fascinated. "Is she an Abbess?" she inquired, putting the concept into the terms she understood best.

Her husband chuckled. "No. She's the Great Mother. And you'll like her."

"When can we go?" She sounded excited, and she was; she'd never had a chance to learn anything of the female mysteries at which the villagers sometimes hinted. Herne she could reverence; the faith was simple and strong, and tied the believers to their land and to each other in a way that Christianity, imported from a very different culture, never could. But like most Christian girls, she'd always had a special place in her heart for the Virgin; the knowledge that her pagan friends also revered a woman seemed reassuringly familiar.

"Now as well as later. Edward..."

The headman lifted both hands, palms outward, as if to fend him off. "When the others get here, I'll tell them where you went. I'll also tell them why I disapprove."

"Certainly." Robin was determined not to fight over this. "As long as you also tell them it's my wish that they stay here and celebrate Lammas with you."

Their eyes met, and they duelled for a moment. Then Edward surrendered, and nodded. "As you say, Robin. As you say."

"Thank you. And don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

The older man didn't respond. He simply turned and walked away. Disturbed, Marion looked at her husband. "Why is he so upset about this?"

Robin waved to the boy who held his mare, signalling him to bring her back. He didn't answer until he had swung onto the animal's broad back and settled himself comfortably in front of the pack she carried, filled with their contributions for the feast.

"The Lady of Brideswell is Edward's Aunt Mathilde," he replied at last. "He grew up in Brideswell, and he was never so happy as when he and Alison were hand-fasted and he could come to Wickham to live near her people. I don't think he got along well with his aunt."

Marion frowned. Robin knew more about this; he simply wasn't talking. She considered pressing him for more details, but decided he would tell her anything that really mattered. She trusted him, and deliberately set her wariness aside.

* * * * *

Two days later, just as the sun reached its zenith in a brassy summer sky, Will Scarlett met Little John and Much on the main track to Wickham. "Had good huntin', did you?" Scarlett greeted the others laconically.

"Aye, that we did." John nodded placidly, and shifted the weight of the carcass he carried across his shoulders. The still-intact head dangled by the ex-serf's elbow; skinned and dressed as the animal was, that was its only obvious source of identity as a fat young buck.

"Me, too!" Much chimed in proudly. He carried a weighty pack -- so heavy that his voice was strained -- made of the buck's green hide. "We found a bee tree, didn't we, John?"

Will raised an eyebrow, reluctantly impressed. If the boy's pack was full of honeycomb, it probably weighed more than the buck. "Did you leave the bees enough for the winter?"

John nodded again. "Aye. It was a strong old hive, and we only took a few pounds off the top. I'll show Edward where it is, and come spring, he'll be able to catch 'em when they swarm." He studied his friend's pack. "And what did you find?"

Will's "pack" was really two large baskets, hastily woven of green willow withes, the leaves still on them; they hung from the ends of a quarterstaff-length pole. The baskets had woven lids, too, so no one could see what weighted them so -- and, more importantly, so their contents would not spill.

Will grinned wickedly as he set down his burden and stretched his stiffened shoulders. "Elderberries," he announced.

"Elderberry pie's my favourite!" Much exclaimed.

John's eyes twinkled. "Aye, but Will here, he's thinkin' about elderberry wine, I'm guessin'. Aren't you?"

"Won't deny it," Scarlett chuckled. "And there's more where I found these. After the feast, Edward can send some folk out with a wain to get the rest. There'll be wine till March."

They all laughed as Will shouldered his burden again, and they set off toward the village.

* * * * *

Several miles away as the crow flies, Nasir and Friar Tuck finished topping off two huge sacks of apples from a small group of trees just off their little-used track. "That should do it," Tuck tied off his sack. "Almost four bushels of apples. That's enough to last till All Souls, at least."

Nasir did not reply. He found room for one of the two apples he held; if he tried to force the other one in, he'd never be able to close the bag. So he bit into the extra apple, and held the crisp fruit in his teeth while he tied the sack shut.

"You know, that's not a bad idea," the renegade monk commented. He glanced around, found a perfectly respectable specimen resting beside his left foot, and bent down to pick it up, biting into it as he straightened. "Apples always taste cold," he mused, glancing at his companion. The Saracen was swinging his sack into place across his shoulders, a clear encouragement that they should be going.

Tuck sighed, and swung his own sack up. As he turned, he caught sight of something in the underbrush down the slope from the trees. "What the...?"

Before Nasir could turn, the answer became startlingly obvious. A huge wild boar, who had evidently come to feed on the wind-fallen apples on the lower slope, charged out at the two humans trespassing on his foraging territory.

The Saracen was closer; Tuck was out of the beast's direct line of sight. The monk cried out in warning, but the boar was too close, and Nasir was facing the wrong way. When the Saracen turned to dodge the animal's rush, his foot slipped on a fallen apple; he lost his balance, and the weight of the sack he carried was enough to drive him to one knee. Before he could recover, the boar was upon him, its tusks ivory razors seeking his vitals.

Three yards away, Tuck could only watch in horror as the beast caught his friend squarely, and tossed him into the thicket. With a savage grunt, the boar dove into the undergrowth after his victim.

The moment the animal turned away, the monk's paralysis fell from him, and he grabbed up his bow and hunting arrows. Nocking a shaft, he went into the brush after the beast.

There was little light in the undergrowth, and Tuck could follow the combat only by the crushed plant life and the sounds of thrashing, accompanied by grunts and squeals from the boar. He imagined the animal tearing Nasir to bits, gritted his teeth, and went determinedly on.

There! He saw the boar's black mane and heaving side. He drew back the arrow until the fletching touched his cheek, and let fly. The beast squalled, and its infuriated struggles became more violent. There was a flash of white tusk, then a flash of steel, and the animal collapsed abruptly.

Tuck approached warily, staying clear of hooves and head, and poked the body sharply with an arrow. It did not move.

"Nasir?" he called, still watching the boar for signs of life. "Nasir...?"

He had little hope his friend could have survived such a devastating attack, and so was not surprised when there was no answer to his call. Careful of the beast -- it was probably dead, but boars were tenacious of life, and this one might yet be capable of delivering a death blow -- he went on looking for the Saracen.

Nasir's body, soaked with blood, lay motionless under the animal's massive head. Tuck swallowed hard, then solemnly raised a hand in benediction, and began to recite the Office for the Dead. He was well into its sonorous phrases, flowing with the familiar sounds, when he heard a breathless grunt.

He flinched, expecting to see the boar struggling to its feet. But, no -- it was Nasir who was moving, feebly trying, from an extremely awkward angle, to push the beast's head aside so he could get up.

"Nasir!" The monk's joy was totally unfeigned. He leapt down the slope to help, grabbing the boar by the ears and holding it up while his friend slowly, painfully crawled out. The moment he was clear, Nasir collapsed, fighting not to voice his pain.

Tuck released the head and dashed to his side. "Nasir! Where did he mark you?"

The Saracen lay curled on his side, his teeth clenched, and his eyes closed. But when the other man spoke, he raised one hand placatingly. "Peace..." His voice was a low, pain-roughened rasp. "Peace. I..." He had to stop to catch his breath, and Tuck's dismay began to turn to panic.

"Nasir, where are you hurt? I can't see... You're just covered with blood...!"

Much to the monk's surprise, his friend smiled -- very faintly, very briefly, and without opening his eyes. "His blood... All...all his..."

Tuck was taken aback. "All...?" he repeated, stunned. "All...! You're not hurt...?"

Slowly, in obvious pain, Nasir managed to sit up, leaning against the slope. "Armour..."

The monk blinked, and looked closer at the stiff leather and sewn ring-mail jerkin his friend always wore. The armour was, indeed, damaged; the leather was slashed and scarred, and some of the rings were now missing. He glanced up, and saw pain lines drawn deeply into the Saracen's usually impassive face. "Any bones broken?"

Nasir inhaled cautiously, his attention turned inward, and was relieved to feel no stab of pain that would have meant broken ribs. But his head was ringing, and everything looked a little fuzzy. He flexed his shoulders slowly, and felt a flare of fresh pain in his left arm. Despite his carefully cultivated stoicism, a gasp escaped through gritted teeth.

Tuck moved closer, and caught his breath in alarm.

Nasir's left arm had been savagely laid open. The boar's tusk had slid down off the sleeve of the man's leather tunic and sunk into his upper arm about halfway between shoulder and elbow. The curve of the tusk caused the wound to spiral down the man's arm to his elbow. Blood ran

freely from the bone-deep slash.

"Jesu!" The monk swallowed hard. "Can you stand, Nasir? Can you climb back up onto the track?"

The Saracen looked up at him, and Tuck wondered if those usually opaque black eyes were focussing at all. The injured man didn't answer him.

"C'mon..." Tuck climbed to his feet, then bent to help the Saracen up. It was hard work; Nasir was dazed and unsteady, his balance uncertain. When they made it up the short slope, the Saracen collapsed again. Panting, Tuck dragged himself up onto the track beside his friend. As he tried to catch his breath, he busily tore the hem of his undertunic into strips to use for bandages. Nasir stirred, and stared exhaustedly into space. Suddenly, he moved, trying to sit up; he was too weak to succeed.

"Lie still!" the monk ordered.

"Sword..." The Saracen ground the word out past clenched teeth. "My swords..."

For the first time, Tuck noticed his friend's scabbards were empty; the scimitars he always kept within reach were nowhere to be seen. He must have been fighting the boar; perhaps that, as well as his armour, had contributed to his nearly miraculous survival.

"I'll fetch them," the monk promised. "Now, lie still, so I can bandage your arm."

Perhaps it was the strident tone of Tuck's voice, or perhaps Nasir had simply lost too much blood too quickly; whatever the reason, the injured man didn't argue. He lay still, breathing lightly and quickly, his face pale, his expression as blank as he could manage.

The wound was more than a handspan long, deep and ragged. Tuck was worried; a boar's tusks were widely believed to carry some sort of poison; wounds they caused tended to rot quickly. There was a good chance Nasir would lose his arm -- if he lived at all.

The monk swallowed hard. Chances were good his friend was as aware of that possibility as he. The idea of the hashashim warrior with his effectiveness thus more than halved was unnerving. Nasir lived by the sword; to die so ignominiously as from an animal attack seemed inappropriate.

His bandaging finished, Tuck watched the Saracen lean back against the tree -- a whitethorn, he noted gratefully. When he was sure his friend was as comfortable as possible, he hiked up his robe and went back into the thicket.

The boar was still; it had not moved. The stench of blood was thick in the hot, motionless air. The monk tried to pull his arrow from the beast's flank, but it was imbedded more than half its length; his strength wasn't sufficient. He sighed, and fought his way back to the beast's head, looking for the glint of Saracen steel.

There! One sword lay on the ground beside the spot where Nasir had fallen, nearly buried in fallen leaves. Tuck picked it up, smiling, and began to poke around in the litter for its mate. A few minutes of searching proved fruitless, and he was confused. Where could the blade be?

He glanced back at the boar, and gasped. He stood below the beast now, and from this angle, all was obvious. The animal's face and skull were badly slashed, and both eyes were ruined. Nasir's second sword was buried crosswise in the boar's throat. He'd used his blades to keep the deadly tusks at bay; when Tuck's arrow found its mark, and the beast threw his head up in reaction, the Saracen had slashed its throat wide open.

The weight of the half-severed skull had fallen onto the blade before the wounded man was able to pull it free; the animal's life-blood had gushed out, nearly drowning the Saracen while he struggled to pull his weapon free. Then the boar's entire dead weight had fallen on top of Nasir, driving the air from his lungs, causing him to lose consciousness.

Tuck stood and marvelled for a moment, both at Nasir's prowess and at his incredible luck. Then he threw his own not-inconsiderable weight against the boar's skull, tipped it back a bit, and freed the second sword. He cleaned the blade on the boar's hide, tucked one blade into his belt, and used the other to cut his arrow free.

Task completed, the monk struggled back up the slope once more, to the track where his friend lay. "Here you are, Nasir. They'll want cleansing, I'm afraid..."

The Saracen nodded shortly, but didn't speak or otherwise move. His usually direct gaze was

pain-fogged, and the monk didn't press him.

"I wiped 'em off as best I could. Here..."

Nasir sat up with some difficulty; Tuck helped him, and let his friend lean on him. The Saracen was silent, holding onto consciousness with both hands, and had no strength to spare. The monk slid the scimitars into their scabbards, getting them wrong at first. Once they were safely back where they belonged and within his reach, Nasir relaxed a fraction of his wariness.

"This is no place to spend the night, Nasir. Stand up, now..." Gently but insistently, Tuck pulled the Saracen to his feet. Walking on his uninjured side, he offered a quiet but continuous monologue as well as a strong, steadying hand. Nasir would rather spend the night in Wickham village than beside the road, so he forced himself to move.

They hadn't walked more than a mile or so when their path joined the main track to Wickham. The Saracen leaned heavily on Tuck's broad shoulder, his crude bandage soaked with blood. There was a shout behind them, and the sound of running feet. Both men turned in response. Nasir's good arm reached reflexively for a scimitar, but fell away, for he lacked the strength to even draw the blade, much less wield it. Fortunately, it wasn't needed.

"Nasir!" John cried in dismay as he dropped his load on the pathway and hurried to his friend's side. "What happened?"

"Soldiers?" Scarlett growled as he joined them.

"No, not soldiers." Tuck explained the incident; Nasir leaned limply against him.

John put a gentle hand on his friend's good shoulder. "Lean on me, my friend," he said softly.

For a moment, it appeared the Saracen's pride might keep him from accepting, but he was wise enough to know his strength was failing him. He let Little John hold him, and gave up trying to think. His arm seemed aflame with pain; each time he moved it, or the muscles even flexed, a fresh shock of agony shot through him, blazing from shoulder to fingertips and, somehow, up into his head. Time ceased to mean anything to him; there was only the pain, and need to keep walking -- and the constant, affectionate, concerned presence of his companions. The journey was no longer than that; walking was simply what he had to do.

The Saracen couldn't know how frightened his friends were for him. He was only just conscious enough to move, to follow where John guided him. He couldn't hear their conversation; of course, he didn't reply to them.

Much, especially, was terribly unnerved. He'd seen his parents murdered; he'd been in dozens of skirmishes with the Sheriff's men; he'd killed his fair share of Norman men-at-arms. But to watch a friend die this way, slowly, painfully, of blood-loss and infection -- which was the prospect Nasir faced; they all knew it, although no one said it aloud -- was a nightmare he wasn't prepared to deal with.

Abruptly, he brightened. "Marion! She'll cure him!" He turned to Tuck hopefully. "She and Robin went to Wickham day before yesterday. They're already there. She'll fix Nasir's arm up right, won't she?"

John and Will exchanged grim looks. They had their doubts, and a quick glance at Tuck showed he shared them. But there was, after all, no point in frightening the boy further.

"Marion's a good herbwoman," John acknowledged. "She'll know what to do, that's for certain."

"He'll be all right, then, won't he?" Much demanded.

"Maybe, lad." John wasn't willing to lie. "Maybe. He's hurt bad."

Much subsided, wide-eyed, frightened all over again.

* * * * *

Wickham village had been welcoming guests for the Lammas feast for a week. Among the most recent arrivals were Dickon and Maude, the husband and wife from Nottingham who'd helped Robin escape from the Sheriff the month before. They had decided not to move away after all, but had come to Wickham in hopes of seeing Robin and Marion, and telling them of their decision to stay right under the Sheriff's nose, as it were, as hidden allies for the outlaw band in case any of them

were captured again. They were introducing themselves to Edward -- who'd seen them at the Blessing, but did not know them -- when Maude, looking past the headman toward the trees, gasped.

"Oh, Dickon!" she cried. "Look! Look!" She began to run. Her husband and Edward followed, only a little more slowly, when they saw what she'd seen.

The tiny band of outlaws had finally made it to the village. Even as they stepped from the shelter of the trees, Nasir collapsed.

"Where's Marion?" Much demanded. "We need her! Nasir's hurt bad!"

"I'm Maude," the woman introduced herself briskly. "You should remember me. What happened?"

John nodded to her. "I remember. You helped Robin while the Sheriff had him. Can you help Nasir?"

"Let me see..."

She knelt beside the unconscious warrior, and frowned when she saw the blood-soaked bandage. "He's still bleeding," she said. "Is that a sword wound?"

"No, mistress," Tuck answered. "A boar's tusk."

She looked grim. "He needs a place to sleep, Edward. He'll not be moving for some days. Where shall we take him?"

The headman sighed, then smiled grimly. "My cottage is best."

John scooped his friend up in his arms and headed for Edward's home. Maude glanced up at her husband. "Bring me my simples, love?"

"Aye, m'lady," he grinned faintly. Then his smile faded. "You're becoming the outlaws' own physician."

"Seems that way, doesn't it?" she agreed.

* * * * *

At Maude's instruction, and with the consent and assistance of Edward's wife Alison, they made up a pallet for Nasir alongside the hearth. Maude dug through her bag of medicinals, and did for Nasir's wound much as she had for Robin's the month before -- soaked off the old bandage, although most of Nasir's was still wet with fresh blood, rinsed away all the blood and mud and other contaminants, then rebandaged the wound, using a salve of her own concoction and clean strips of linen. The Saracen's friends were fascinated. "Why d'you wash it so?" John wanted to know. "Why not just wrap it up again?"

"I haven't figured that out," Maude admitted. "I just know that wounds heal faster and cleaner if they're cleaned at once and kept clean."

"Wonder why that is," Scarlett mused, trying not to look at the unconscious Saracen. Seeing the formidable laid so low unnerved him more than he cared to admit, even to himself. "Makes no kind of sense..."

"Nevertheless... I watched my dogs, and my mother's cats. They lick every wound all the time, keeping it as clean as they can, and it seems to help them."

"Is Nasir going to be all right?" Much begged.

Maude smiled gently, and tousled his curly mop of hair. "I think so, lad. But he's going to be very sick for a good while."

"But he'll get better..."

"I don't know for sure, but I think he will. He's young, and very strong..."

The boy's relief was the most obvious, but they all relaxed at her words. Then Scarlett sat bolt upright. "Where's Robin and Marion?" he demanded of Edward. "They should've been here two days ago..."

The headman, standing in the doorway, answered quietly. "They were here. They left."

That startled them all. Will opened his mouth to call Edward a liar, but John put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Will..."

Scarlett shut up, and the big man turned back to Edward. "Why'd they go? Where'd they go?"

"They... Robin decided to celebrate Lammas in Brideswell. He wants you all to stay here for it, though."

"Why?" Scarlett demanded bluntly.

Edward's voice took on an edge. "Because he'd not inflict you on strangers, drunkard."

Will flushed, and reacted with typical anger. "I'm not drunk..."

"Yet," John grinned.

Tuck chuckled, and Much tried to hide his amusement.

Scarlett wanted to explode, but these were his best and closest friends. He choked, coughed, and subsided, albeit with poor grace. Before anyone could comment further, Edward went on. "On the other hand, I want you to go after them as quickly as you can."

The outlaws sat up, startled again.

"What?"

"Why?"

"But, if Robin said..."

"Hush!" That was Tuck. They all obeyed. "Don't wake Nasir."

They looked guiltily at their friend, who despite the monk's concern appeared quite unconscious. Tuck turned toward Edward. "Why should we disobey Robin?"

The headman spread his hands wide. "I think he's in terrible danger."

"Why?"

"He's gone to Brideswell, at the invitation of the Lady there." The outlaws still didn't understand; he swallowed his annoyance, and went on. "Brideswell is where the Goddess Mother of All still rules. She is Herne's Mother, Sister, and Wife. She creates, and She destroys. Every nineteen years, they kill the Sacred King there, to keep the land fresh and fertile. Years ago, the Sacred King was the Conqueror's son Rufus, but usually it's a substitute. Allric of Loxley was the last Sacrifice. That was nineteen years ago this fall."

Tuck caught on first. "Allric was Robin's father. You think these people in Brideswell want Robin for that...?"

"I do," Edward said flatly.

John and Scarlett were incredulous; Much didn't quite understand. "You mean, you think they want to tie Robin to an altar and slit his throat so the grain'll grow?" Will demanded.

"No, I think they're going to tie him to their Maypole and cut him to pieces with sickles and scythes," the headman growled. "You've got to get there before the Lammas feast, and get him away from them!"

Will Scarlett's suspicious nature got the better of him. "Didn't you tell Robin this?"

"He knew."

"Oh, yeah? Then, why'n God's name did he go?"

"Robin," Edward said heavily, "doesn't believe he's the Sacrifice. He says he hasn't been Called."

"Well, then, he's all right, then." Much grinned in relief.

"No, he isn't!" the headman snapped, and the boy's smile vanished.

"Why not? If he hasn't been Called?" Scarlett demanded.

Edward was losing control. "He's Herne's Son. The Mother doesn't always ask of Her children. Sometimes, She demands. And maybe this Priestess won't care if he isn't the One Summoned. Maybe the One is someone she knows, someone she'd rather spare. Robin's a stranger there, to them..." He choked, and turned away.

But he'd made his point. Will, John, and Tuck were pale with horror, and Much was frightened beyond speech. His mouth moved, but no sound emerged.

"Go. Please." The headman's voice was very quiet. "Maude and I will take care of Nasir. Save Robin."

There were no more arguments. They went.

* * * * *

Tuck, Will, John, and Much weren't the only ones on the road out of Wickham -- but Alain was going the other way. He was a short, dark Brython who was visiting his cousin Edward for Lamas. He'd overheard the headman's impassioned plea to the outlaws. Now, he hurried on his way to report to his master.

* * * * *

"That's insane!" Gisburne exploded.

Alain stood his ground. "It's the truth, milord Sheriff," he insisted. "I don't know if the facts are so, but Edward believed them, and he sent the rest of the outlaws to Brideswell to spirit Robin away, or to rescue him, if need be."

De Rainault slouched in his high seat. "A very bizarre story, Alain," he drawled, studying the lovely lines of his newest tiercel peregrine, perched on a floor stand beside him. "Why should Robin Hood submit to this particular ritual? Does it truly entail murder?"

The peasant nodded vigorously, and recounted what the headman had said about the line of Sacrificial Kings.

Gisburne snorted in disgust. "The man's an outlaw, a traitor! You want us to believe he'd willingly allow himself to be butchered in some magical ritual to keep King John hale? That's absurd!"

"No, no, Gisburne..." de Rainault interrupted. "No, I believe it does make some sense. The peasants have always believed that the health of the country is directly tied to the health of the King, for the King is the country. That's why we paid Richard's ransom."

"Stupid, ignorant superstition!" the knight retorted.

"But nonetheless real, Gisburne," the Sheriff reminded him softly, his tone arch. "Just because we think it foolish is no reason we cannot make use of this belief."

"How?" Gisburne demanded truculently.

"Think, Guy, no matter the pain it causes." The sarcasm was sweetly voiced, and Gisburne gritted his teeth. "If we could somehow ensure that Edward's fears are justified..."

Alain was quicker, and grinned nastily. "I know the road to Brideswell, milord."

"Excellent." De Rainault nodded. "Gisburne, I expect you won't need too many men for this. In any case, you can't have more than a dozen."

"Why not?" the knight demanded, outraged. "Sheriff, I..."

"You're incompetent, Gisburne. The Duke of Bedford says so, and I'm not about to risk my neck trusting you with more than a token of anything again, at least not for a long time."

The Duke's visit was still an acutely embarrassing reminder of disaster. Gisburne blushed to the roots of his fair hair. "I'll take the dozen," he growled, turning away. "Your precious self will be safe, while I take all the risks, and you grab all the credit."

"What was that, Gisburne?" The Sheriff hadn't quite heard the second, muttered sentence. "Did you say something?"

"I said I'll take the dozen, milord. I'll leave at once."

"Of course, of course..." De Rainault let it go; he'd a fair notion of what the knight had said, but filed the information away for later use. Gisburne could be as sulky as a child, and he had to be managed as carefully as a haggard falcon. "Like you, my beauty," he told his preening tiercel. "Like you..."

Gisburne stalked away in a red rage that didn't lessen as he recalled the debacle of the visit of the Duke of Bedford. Believing he had Robin Hood, wounded and near death, safely locked in the chirurgeon's rooms in Nottingham Castle, he'd ordered a gallows built, and a holy-day feast prepared. The first sign of disaster came when, despite an impressive and showily armed escort, the Duke's party was fired on just outside the city by some accursed peasant with a longbow. The arrow missed the Duke, but wounded his destrier, a well-loved and cherished -- though now retired -- battle mount.

Refusing to ride the wounded beast or leave him to the farrier's care, the Duke had slowed the entire caravan to the injured animal's pace, causing them to be so late in arriving that the feast was ruined. There was nothing to eat when they finally did get to Nottingham but day-old bread and some cheese. Just as the Duke's party entered the courtyard of Nottingham Castle, the hastily built gallows -- which blocked almost every possible route into or out of the castle -- collapsed in a roar and clatter of breaking wood. All the horses panicked. The Duke's wounded stallion was kicked by an hysterical packhorse that never would have willingly come within yards of him.

The kick broke the destrier's uninjured foreleg; after coddling the animal for hours along the road, the Duke was forced to destroy him after all. He'd been extremely displeased, and had stomped through the Hall in a foul mood, the Sheriff a silent shadow behind him.

When the ruined feast was discovered, the Duke and the Sheriff took turns ranting at Gisburne. His only defence was to tell them about his illustrious prisoner. They all trooped down to the chirurgeon's rooms -- only to find a man-at-arms and the chirurgeon himself tied and gagged on the floor. The prisoner was gone.

Gisburne was lucky to escape with his life.

Still smarting from the shame of disgracing himself before the Duke -- De Rainault's opinion was, after all, quite unimportant -- the knight was determined to prove that he'd merely been plagued by bad luck and stupid underlings.

* * * * *

Like Wickham, the village of Brideswell had been welcoming friends, relatives, and casual acquaintances for days. Many came with donkeys or small ponies carrying packs or drawing carts full of children and supplies. Among this veritable parade, Robin and Marion stood out only because she led the pony and he rode, the reverse of the usual pattern. They fell into the slowly moving column, and followed it into the village.

The outlaw pair were at the end of a line of visitors, and thus had the opportunity to see the village before anyone in the village noticed them. The black mare had been part of pack trains for most of her life, and she followed the beast in front of her, hardly needing Marion's hand on her headstall.

Marion and Robin took in the spectacle around them. Every doorway was decorated with a sheaf of ripe wheat tied with a length of vine. Most had some sort of fruit added -- an apple, a few grapes, a pear. Every person, every cow, and every ox bore a flower garland. Even the dogs were beribboned.

A newly erected pole stood in the centre of the village green, an oak tree with all its branches lopped off, its bark still rough, the fresh wounds dripping sap in long rivulets. The top of the pole bore a crown of corn and flowers, from which dangled equal numbers of ribbons and ropes.

At the base of the pole, in the shade of a canopy woven of green willow, stood a man and a woman,

both dressed all in flowing white. The man was tall and straight, with long straight black hair cut off straight above his eyes, but left free to flow around his shoulders. The woman was as dark, but her eyes were startlingly blue. Both were decked with flowers and vines; the woman held a long knife in one hand, and the man a cup in his. They smiled, and greeted the visitors as royalty greeted guests.

Robin took this all in at once, and hid a smile. While the others all dismounted or climbed down from their carts and approached the royal couple on foot, he urged the mare forward until he confronted them face to face, still mounted.

"Herne's Son of Sherwood greets the Lady of Brideswell and her Lord," he said clearly, lifting a hand in salute.

There was a ragged reaction of surprise from those near enough to hear; clearly, he hadn't been expected. Even the Lady looked startled.

"Hail, Brother!" The Lord raised his hands in a ceremonial gesture, then stepped forward to hold the mare's head.

Robin threw his good leg over the animal's head and slid to the ground, catching himself on the mare so as not to land on his wounded leg. But the sharp-eyed Lord saw him wobble, and put out a hand to help. When their hands touched, they both felt a shock, and they stared into one another's eyes for a long, tense moment.

Robin broke the frozen tableau. He bowed. "My Lord," he said softly.

The other man's expression was one of pleasant serenity. He smiled, and nodded graciously, accepting the homage. "Younger Brother, we welcome thee to Lammas."

The Lady came to stand beside her Lord; Marion pushed her way forward to stand beside Robin, and put an arm protectively around her man. He put his own arm around her in response, and spoke in a confident tone, clearly, so all the villagers around them could also hear. "Lord and Lady, this is Marion, the Maiden in Sherwood."

The Lady smiled tremulously. "The Mother's Blessing on you both, Hooded One of Sherwood, and on your Maiden. Welcome to Brideswell, and to Lammas. Do you understand why you were summoned here?"

"Summoned?" Marion pounced, suspicious. "We were told it was an invitation!"

"I understand," Robin nodded, ignoring her outburst.

The Lady and her Lord exchanged pensive looks. Then the Lord leaned over and kissed his Lady lightly. "You've work, love. Go on. I'll settle them in."

She hesitated, visibly torn. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her, then gave her a little push toward a covey of beldames who hovered around the two couples, obviously wishing and needing to interrupt, but not quite daring to do so. The old women seized the Lady and swept her away, chattering about priorities, procedures, and precedences.

"They'll keep her occupied till dinner. I'll have to rescue her then. Hello, my name's Ranaid. We really weren't sure you'd come."

"Once we heard the invitation, I could not have stayed away," Robin told him quietly. "But where is Mathilde?"

"She died just after Beltane," Ranaid answered. "Our Lady's name is also Mathilde; she is the Old One's granddaughter. We were married at Midsummer."

Deep in the bushes, out of earshot, Guy of Gisburne crouched under a low hazel and stared at the activity in the village.

"That's him," Alain hissed into his ear. "That's their King."

"The man in the white robe?"

"Aye."

"Then why doesn't he carry the sword, instead of the woman?"

"The sword is the male symbol, so she carries it. The cup is the female symbol, so he carries that."

The knight didn't understand, but he also didn't care to understand. "Is that the sword she'll use to kill him?" was all he wanted to know.

"She will strike the first blow," Alain whispered. "But everyone takes a hand in the killing."

"Why doesn't he run?" Gisburne stared in fascination as the smiling man greeted Robin and Marion. "Or doesn't he know?"

"He knows." There was a note of pride in the peasant's voice that Gisburne missed completely. "He knows. He had to fight for the privilege."

"That's insane!" the knight muttered.

"Some people think there are some things worth dying for," Alain growled.

"Soldiers fight. Dying is for losers. Our course of action is plain. We have to capture him, hold him hostage."

The peasant nodded. "That will work. If you kill him, the Sacrifice is ruined."

"And his ransom shall be the sacrifice of Robin Hood."

* * * * *

The waxing moon was still a night or two from full; the eastern rim was still a bit fuzzy, not clearly defined, and the disk shape itself not yet perfectly round. But it threw enough light in the quiet summer's night for every leaf and blade of grass to shimmer with argent lunar magic.

In the middle of the village green, some distance from the nearest cottage -- the width of the village from the campsites of their guests -- Ranald stood motionless, alone, letting the silver light wash over him. It was cool and refreshing, and seemed to cleanse his spirit as much as the fresh-running stream nearby would cleanse his body before the Sacred Wedding, the next evening.

"O Mother," he said quietly, his eyes fixed on the hovering silver disk, "tomorrow I die the Death. I come to You as the Bridegroom, joyful, bedecked with flowers. Give me the strength to do the ritual properly, that the land and the people may be renewed. My mind and my heart are focussed wholly on You, Goddess. I beg You to strengthen my body, that I may do You, and my people, all due honour."

In his eyes -- plain now, with no one to see -- glowed an all-consuming passion. The village around him, the ground beneath him, even his mortal wife waiting for him to join her for their last night together, all meant nothing to him. All his awareness was focussed on his Deity, the Ever-Living Goddess, She of a Thousand Names.

Sometimes, he knew, the Bridegroom was not told of his Choosing, as Allric of Loxley had not known; although he had realized it at the end, and had died properly. Seldom was a volunteer simply accepted. Sometimes, a band of candidates drew lots; Ranald had won a wrestling tournament to earn his privilege. Even so, he knew there were undoubtedly several men in the village who had been assigned to watch him, just in case, as the Wedding drew nearer, his courage might falter. As long as they stayed out of his sight, he could ignore them. They were unnecessary; his entire being was intent upon the coming Sacred Marriage. He tolerated their presence.

But the eyes on him were not those of the villagers. Instead, Guy of Gisburne watched from the edge of the wood, waiting for the screech owl call that would mean Alain and the two men-at-arms were in position. The man in the white robe stood quite still, his back to the village, staring raptly up at the moon -- like some sort of lunatic.

"T'whooo. T'whit, t'whooooo..."

The cry was so artful that, for a moment, Gisburne thought it was real, and forgot the signal he was awaiting. The guardsman with him knew better than to touch him, but he managed to shift his position slightly and curse his armour's uncomfortable weight. The knight abruptly came to himself. "All right, come along. And keep silent!"

The guardsman only grunted. He was as unimpressed by Gisburne's white belt as by his competence.

He wasn't the one who sounded like an ox caught in a wallow...

The knight climbed to his feet, and moved stealthily toward the man in the white robe. He had taken off his cloak, and held it gingerly before him in both hands. From the other side of the clearing, Alain and the others came, also holding their cloaks outstretched. They were bent on capture, not murder.

They were still several yards from Ranaid when he became aware of them. Startled, he turned toward Gisburne, and Alain rushed him, flipping the edge of his cloak over the Sacred King's head, pinning his arms to his sides.

But Alain had forgotten what the others hadn't even known -- that Ranaid had won his crown by virtue of his physical prowess. He shook himself free of Alain's grip as easily as a duck shakes off water, and was clawing himself free of the entangling cloak when the others, led by Gisburne, tackled him. He went down in a flurry of arms, legs, and cloaks.

They all fought in eerie silence -- Ranaid because Alain's cloak still muffled his head and made breathing difficult, and the others for fear of discovery. The battle was vicious, but brief. Ranaid was winning, slowly but surely breaking their holds on him, when Gisburne in desperation ripped off his helmet and coshed the peasant with the heavy iron cone. All the strength and energy ran out of their foe like water from a broken jug, and he fell limp at their feet.

"Whew...!" Slowly, Gisburne, Alain, and the three men-at-arms picked themselves up and shook themselves off. The knight looked at the motionless body at his feet and realized that, in the brilliant moonlight, the white-clad figure of the Sacred King seemed to glow. No details of face or form were visible; he was just an amorphous white lump on the sheep-gnawed lawn.

Suddenly, Gisburne shivered, and glanced toward the village. There were several hundred people down there who apparently considered this man to be, at the very least, consecrated to their god. However little the knight thought of the ancient religion of the land, he knew the villagers' capacity for violence. The idea of a raging mob of peasants with torches coming after him bent on punishing sacrilege was terrifying. "Pick him up, and let's get out of here!" he ordered.

There was a sudden flurry of activity as the others recognized the danger Gisburne had seen, and scurried to obey. In moments, the sheepwalk was empty.

Only yards away, Mathilde tossed restlessly, impatient and mightily disturbed. A very human part of her wanted to leap to her feet, dash off after Ranaid, find him, and run away with him. She fantasized the two of them living together quietly in Devonshire, far from everything here.

But the priestess in her sighed enviously. Tomorrow, Ranaid went to his epiphany. He would marry the Goddess, and She would make him a God. No such apotheosis awaited her, no matter how true or how dedicated. The Goddess lived in every woman. When she died, she would be reunited with the Great Mother. Until then, she would just have to live her life.

But where was he? Surely, he should have been back...

* * * * *

"Nasir..."

The call came from a long way away, and the fog was too thick for the Saracen to discern its source. Accustomed to silence, he didn't think to reply; he simply waited. If it was important, the call would come again. If not, he could go back to sleep.

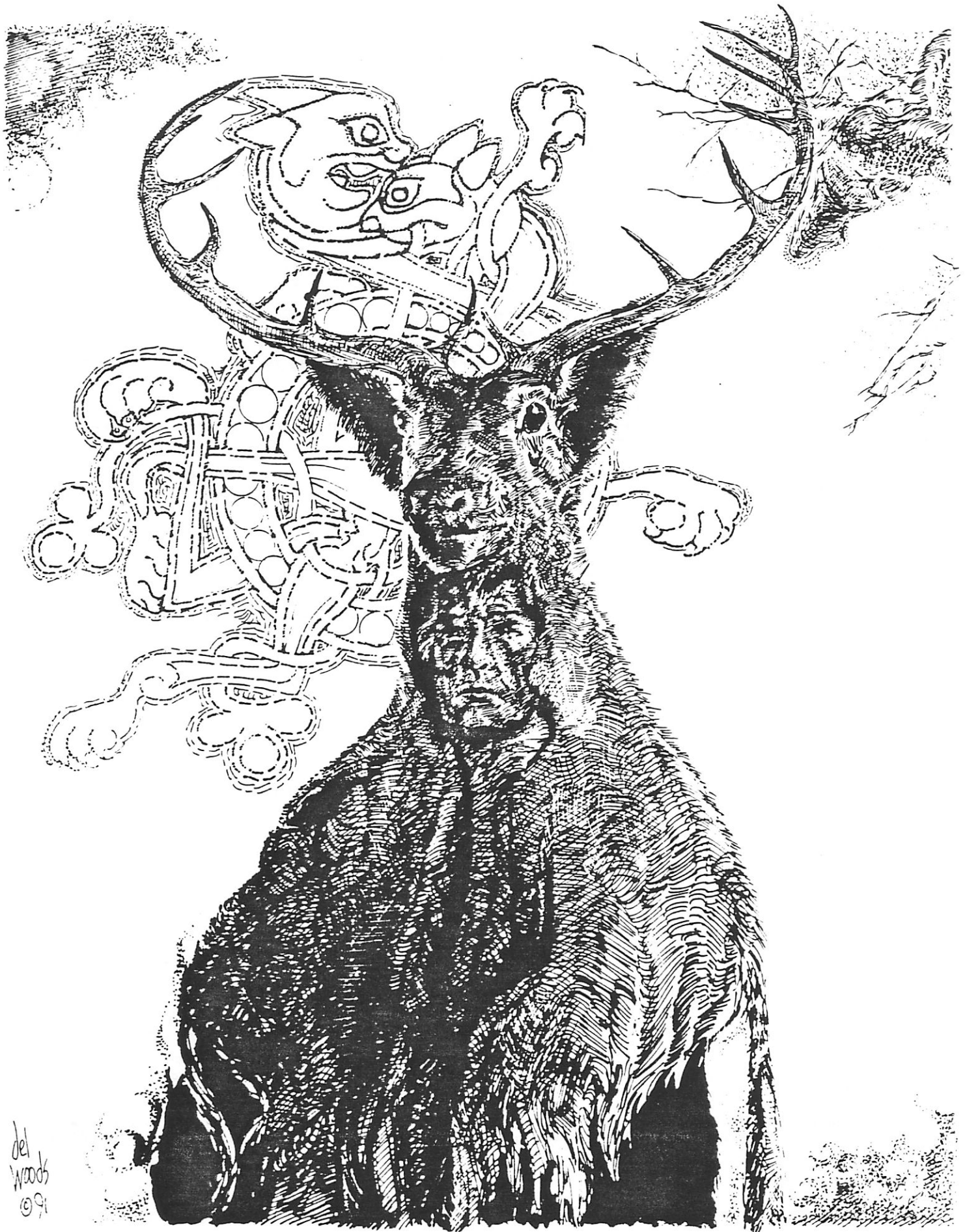
"Nasir..." The low, sepulchral tone seemed to come from all directions at once. He cocked his head, puzzled. It seemed somewhat familiar.

"Nasir..."

The fog swirled, and suddenly the Stag-Crowned One stood before him.

"Herne..." He whispered the name, wide-eyed with awe. The English God had never before come just to him.

The antlered head nodded once, regally. "The Hooded Man stands on the threshold of disaster, Nasir. The door, however, is not yet shut. He might still escape. You must go to him, and show him the way."



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Nasir felt cold, and with more than just the chill of the night fog. He vaguely remembered the boar's attack, then nothing but the disorientation of fever dreams. He had no idea where Robin had gone.

The helplessness was infuriating; his friend and leader needed him, and he couldn't help. His slashed arm was useless anyway, even if he knew where to go.

Herne understood. "Robin and Marion have gone to Brideswell to do their duty to the Great Mother," he explained. "It is not a long journey, but you must leave at once."

The Saracen nodded shortly. Another man might have asked questions, demanded explanations, but the hashashim warrior knew everything he needed to know, and so he said nothing.

The fog-shrouded sun was a bright light behind the Forest God. The mist swirled around them, stirred by a chill breeze, and the light suddenly brightened. Herne threw up both hands, palms outward, toward the Saracen. The sun broke through in a golden blast of heat and light, streaming between the Hunter's hands, through the gateway that was the spread of his antlers; it fell, hot and welcome, on the desert-bred warrior. He closed his eyes against the sudden glare, and fancied he could smell the dates and the pomegranates, the camels and the coffee, of a Damascus marketplace where he had spent many a pleasant day. Homesickness swept over him, startling and dismaying, and he tried to shake it off.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on a straw pallet in a rude little thatched cottage, beside a fire that should have been banked. The dream images and their message were vivid, and he sat up, scanning the packed earth floor for his clothes.

Maude was awakened by the sounds of someone stirring. She sat up and looked across the cottage, shadowy in the pre-dawn darkness. "Nasir!" she said, sharply but not loudly; her own husband, as well as Edward and his family, was still asleep.

The Saracen glanced at her, but did not cease his dressing.

"Are you mad, man?" she hissed, leaving her own pallet to reach his side in time to snatch up his leather jerkin before he could reach it.

Nasir was pale, and not quite steady, but his expression was intense. His obsidian eyes flashed angrily when she pulled the jerkin out of his reach. "I have to go, woman!"

"Your fever just broke at moonset," she argued. "You can't go anywhere!"

He ground his teeth. "I must..."

"You must lie still and rest, to regain your strength."

"No. Robin is in trouble..."

"How could you know that?" The question came from Edward, who had been awakened by the low-voiced argument.

For a moment, Nasir seemed disinclined to explain, but it was apparent no one would let him leave if he didn't. Finally, reluctantly, he spoke. "Herne came into my dream," he said slowly, softly. "I must go to Brideswell. Where is it?"

Maude and Edward exchanged startled glances. The Saracen had been unconscious during their earlier discussions. How could he know of Brideswell, and of Edward's fears?

The headman pounced on Nasir's first words. "Herne said Robin's in danger?" The Saracen nodded slowly. "I was right then," he went on darkly. "The Old Woman is not to be trusted."

Maude, however, was not distracted from her primary objection. "Even if it's true, there's nothing you can do about it, Nasir," she said. "Little John and the others have a day's lead on you, and you're wounded. You couldn't catch up, and you wouldn't be much help if you did."

He stared at her wordlessly, then leaned forward, and pulled his leather jerkin from her slackened hold. With a swiftness born of much practice, he pulled it over his head and stood to lace the collar.

The woman's jaw dropped. He'd used his injured arm as if nothing had happened to it. Edward, too, was shocked. Nasir himself was mildly interested in the phenomenon, but hardly surprised.

The Horned One wanted him to rescue the Hooded Man; it only made sense that he would need to be healed of his wound.

"What...? How...?" Maude scrambled to her feet and grabbed hold of the Saracen's wrist, holding his arm still so she could check the wound.

The bandage she had applied was still in place, stiff and heavy with dried blood. She unwrapped it gently, expecting a gush of blood from the fresh, unhealed tear. Nasir submitted without comment. The bandaging came off easily, dried blood falling away as a soft, rust-coloured powder, to reveal an angry red scar -- but no open wound to mar the smooth olive of his skin.

"How...?" The woman was at a loss.

"Herne." The Saracen shrugged on his twin baldrics and tested himself, drawing both swords without evident discomfort. He could feel the weakness in the once-injured arm, but there was only an echo of pain. He was not at full capacity, but he could fight -- and that capability, linked to the implacable will of the trained hashashim, would be enough.

The two Saxons stared at each other. No matter how deep their faith in Herne, they were awed. Miracles were as rare for pagans as among Christians.

Finally accoutered again, Nasir ducked out of the little cottage into the misty greyness of the dawn. The others followed. "Where is Brideswell?" the Saracen asked again, when he looked around and realized he had no idea which path to take from the village.

The headman swallowed, and glanced around. Maude was dumbstruck; Dickon, rubbing sleep from his eyes, seemed disinclined to speak; and his own wife was yawning as she began building up the fire to start their breakfasts. No one was going to help him; no one was going to advise him, or tell him what he should do.

"Edward..."

He looked back at Nasir, who stared at him intently. He shuddered, and lifted a hand to point. "It's that way, if you were a bird," he answered at last, reluctantly. "But the path curves away to the three-rock ford, then curves back."

"Did Robin and Marion take the road?"

"I imagine so. Robin still isn't up to hard travel, and the way through the woods is hard for a pony. The road would be easier."

The Saracen nodded once, briefly, then turned away. He said no farewells, made no gestures. He simply glanced at the rising sun for his bearings, then walked across the village and into the woods.

* * * * *

The first clue Robin and Marion had that anything was amiss was the sound of a scuffle outside their little cot, and a muffled curse in a voice that might have been familiar. They woke up and looked up -- just in time to see Much, Little John, Tuck, and Will Scarlett shoved into their little hut. Tuck had to make a supreme effort to avoid falling on Marion, and ended up sprawled on the packed earth floor, frantically gasping for air.

"Tuck? Tuck!" Marion knelt beside him, frightened for him. "Tuck, are you hurt?"

Scarlett pushed himself off Robin with a grunted apology. Robin hardly heard it. "What are you doing here?" he demanded of his band.

Scarlett shrugged, and reached for his ankles. Robin looked, and his jaw snapped shut. The ex-soldier was hobbled with rough twists of linen rope. John, too, had been hobbled, and his wrists were tied as well. A quick look revealed that Much and Tuck were similarly bound.

"What's going on out there?"

No one answered him directly; they were all too busy untying themselves. Helpless with his hands bound, John had to wait for help; it was he who responded. "Whole village is buzzin' like a hornets' nest," he grunted. "Summat's wrong, for certain, but they never told us anything."

"No, they just jumped us, and trussed us up, and tossed us in here," Much added.

Scarlett finished freeing John and jumped to his feet. He stepped out of the cottage, only to be roughly thrown back in by a man with a quarterstaff.

"Inside," snarled a rough voice they all heard.

Will was completely flabbergasted; for a moment, he didn't move. Then he made an odd sound, halfway between a whine and a snarl, and started back out after the man. But his momentary pause was enough; John grabbed him by an ankle and pulled him back.

"Wait a minute! You can't fight him bare-handed! An' he can likely whistle up the whole village. So sit down here, and we'll think."

"We don't have to think much." Tuck still hadn't quite caught up with his breathing, but at least he was able to sit up. "I heard several of the men talking."

"What's happened, then?" Robin inquired.

"Ranald's been kidnapped."

Marion gasped. "By whom?"

The monk's anger was evident. "Who else? Gisburne!"

"But why?" John asked, puzzled. "He's a peasant, like us. He has nothin'..."

"He is the Sacred King," Robin corrected solemnly. "As my father was before. Do we need to guess what the ransom is?"

Tuck shuddered, and shook his head, looking away. Marion blanched. It took the others a bit longer to figure it out, but they did, and turned terrified faces toward their leader and friend.

"That's what Edward smelled, then, isn't it?" Scarlett growled. "Not your wishing, but Gisburne's ill-wishing."

"So it would seem," Robin nodded. "Much, is that guard still close by?"

The boy peeked outside cautiously, ready to duck if someone swung at him. But his venture brought no reaction. "I don't see him, Robin."

"All right. I can't run, so I'm going to stay here. I want..."

What he wanted was drowned out in a storm of protest from his friends. He let them carry on for a few moments, then stopped it all by lifting one hand. They fell silent reluctantly, but they did obey.

"As I said, I can't run yet, so I'll stay. I'm still a guest, officially at least. I'll be fine here until sunset."

Little John was grim. "Probably. But if yon witch comes an' offers you wine, don't you drink it. None of it. Not a sip."

Robin frowned. "Why not? She'll not poison me. It must be a blood sacrifice..."

"Aye." The shaggy head nodded. "But it'll be mistletoe wine, Robin, to change the pain. A little doesn't kill, true enough, but she'll make sure you die... They call mistletoe 'all-heal' because it cures all illness, all enchantment. It does it by sending you dreaming, and eventually you die." He was in deadly earnest, and Robin, studying his friend intently, decided he might as well believe; John certainly did. "She'll have some ready, t'be givin' it to Ranald tonight. Don't let her slip any to you..."

"All right, John. Naught but water or milk. I promise."

"Naught but water, Robin. Milk can mask it." John was grimly serious, and Robin didn't argue.

"Only water, then. I promise, John."

"All right. So, you want us to escape?" Scarlett butted in.

The Hooded Man nodded. "Aye. Watch for the villagers, but split up, and make for the woods."

"An' then what? Hide in the shrubbery till they haul you out to the stake?" Scarlett was his usual abrasive self.

Robin smiled quietly, and shook his head. "Of course not, Will."

"Then what?"

Their leader blinked in surprise; the ex-soldier wasn't usually so thick-headed. "Why, I want you to find Gisburne, of course, and bring Ranaid home."

"What? Bring the man back to be slaughtered like a sheep? Much thanks we'd get for that!"

"No!" Robin's voice was sharp. "He becomes God tonight, out there, at the hands of his family and friends. I would never deny him that! Never! The honour is his!"

He glared at them in the uncomfortable silence that followed his outburst. None of them would meet his eyes. Eventually, he calmed, and sighed. "You don't understand, do you? Any of you?"

John shook his shaggy head. "No, lad, we don't. But if you do, we'll take you at your word." His eyes twinkled as he turned to grin at Scarlett. "After all, Will, it'll be confounding Gisburne and rescuing Robin, all at once."

"For that, I'll go along," Scarlett growled. "But I still don't like this whole idea."

"You don't have to like it, Will. Just do it."

The ex-soldier pushed himself to his feet. He wanted to pace, but the tiny cottage was too small. There was barely enough room for them all to sit. So he sidled up to the doorway and, back pressed against the wattled wall, edged to the entrance, looking for the guard.

"Is he out there?" Robin asked in a low voice.

"I don't see anything."

Even as he spoke, he was edging farther out the door. Suddenly, he broke into a run.

"Out! Out! All of you! Scatter, so they can't chase you all!" Robin's voice was harsh, commanding, and so unexpected that John, Much, and Marion were on their feet and out the door before they had time to consciously react.

A few strides from the door, Marion realized what had happened, and turned to go back; she had no intention of leaving Robin alone. But even as she turned, Tuck emerged from the hut, grabbed her firmly by the arm, and dragged her along with him, despite her protests. While she argued, someone from the village spotted them, and the alarm was raised.

Flight from such alarms was so ingrained in the outlaws that both Marion and Tuck turned at once, and fled for the cover of the sheltering forest at a dead run.

Robin watched with quiet satisfaction. Now, he'd have both the silence he needed to prepare himself to follow his father as Sacred King, and also a better than fighting chance to not need to be Him. Life was sweet, and he had no particular desire to leave it, even by a divine route.

But still, the lure of godhead was strong... He could feel it, knew the tug of the promise that pulled Ranaid to his fate -- and knew a mild regret that he had not yet truly been Chosen.

Lost in his thoughts, he crawled back to his pallet and seated himself there, wrapped and supported his wounded leg with the blankets he and Marion had so recently shared, and shut out most of the outside world.

* * * * *

Even through the forest canopy, the noon sun was too hot for most creatures. The desert-bred Saracen, however, didn't even loosen his collar. The heat was welcome on his back, and seemed to lubricate his stiffened muscles.

He'd been moving at a relaxed trot for several hours, and wasn't even breathing hard. The only times he'd stopped at all had been to drink, long and deeply, at every stream and pool he en-

countered. Thirst, strong and demanding, and an underlying stratum of weakness where there had once been reserves of strength were the only remnants of his injury. Indeed, he had nearly forgotten it. Instead, his mind worked double-time, speculating about what he knew, what he'd been told, and what could be surmised from actual knowledge. All the while, his reason told him speculation was pointless; he would know for certain soon enough.

From what Edward had told him, he should be within half a mile of the village now, unless he'd lost his way completely -- and that possibility was so remote that Nasir never really considered it. Signs of habitation were present, plain as day to the educated observer. Small, subtle things, such as the total lack of fallen tree limbs, or dead wood of any kind but the most overgrown, or the patch of comfrey that had been carefully weeded and recently tended -- both were obvious clues.

A rustle in a thicket sent the Saracen into the shadow of a huge old oak, where he froze into utter immobility, every sense alert.

"Well, I don't think any lousy peasant is going to find us out here," one man said with great satisfaction. "Villagers don't venture far from their villages."

"We aren't far from that village," another man pointed out.

"Well, I'm tired of walking. Let's spend the night here."

There was a pause, during which the rustling noises stopped. Then, "All right," the second voice said. "We're in no hurry, after all..."

There came the muffled metallic rustlings of armour. "I'm not looking forward to telling the Sheriff that his filthy scheme is working."

Nasir exhaled slowly. From their accents, these two men were neither Saxon nor Norman; he hesitantly decided they might be Danish mercenaries. They didn't seem to like the Sheriff much...

The Saracen hadn't lived as long as he had by being indecisive or shy. He made his decision, and acted instantly. He pounced on the nearer of the two men with the swiftness of a cobra, and in a trice was kneeling astride the man's body, scimitar blade to his throat. Neither man even suspected his presence until it was too late.

His prisoner didn't dare move; the other man stood, sword drawn, but didn't dare attack for fear of getting his friend killed. The stark tableau held for a long moment, while Nasir assessed his foes. They were mercenaries, certainly, with only a financial stake in the situation.

"Who are you?" the man he hadn't seized challenged.

"I am the man to whom you will speak true words," Nasir said softly. "Or your friend will die." There was no mistaking either his sincerity or his intensity.

The other man let his sword tip drop a few inches, frowning in confusion. "Tell you what? We are only soldiers..."

"You have a message for the Sheriff of Nottingham, do you not?"

The mercenary glanced at his hostage partner, and shrugged. "Aye..." he admitted.

"What is the message?"

He frowned again. "The message? Why would you...?"

Nasir jerked at his prisoner's head, pushing the man's throat more tightly against his scimitar. The edge was razor-sharp, and cut a thin red line into the man's neck. His partner threw up his empty hand. "Wait! The message is from Sir Guy of Gisburne..."

"Yes..." the Saracen prompted.

"It is just that Gisburne has the hostage, as required, and anticipates all will be accomplished by full dark."

"Tonight?" Nasir pressed.

"Aye..."

"And where is Gisburne?"

The soldier glared defiantly, and Nasir tightened his grip on his hostage so tightly that the man choked audibly.

"Damn you...!"

"Where?" The Saracen was implacable.

The mercenary was astute enough to realize it. "He has taken a charcoal burner's cot in the woods just north of Brideswell," he growled. "The prisoner bides there, though Gisburne will surely watch the ransom being paid from the hill overlooking the village."

Nasir didn't reply in words. He threw his prisoner at the other soldier and leaped, cat-like, for the trees. By the time the two mercenaries had untangled themselves and picked themselves up off the ground, he was long gone.

Shaken, they glanced at one another. The ex-hostage swallowed hard. "It has been a long time since we saw Denmark..."

His partner nodded. "Too long," he agreed. "Let's go now."

As one, they picked up their scattered gear and turned east, toward London and its port, instead of to the northeast course that would take them to Nottingham.

* * * * *

Nasir crouched low under a hawthorn and studied the charcoal burner's cottage. It was a good place to hold a prisoner -- two walls of wattle and daub forming an awkward triangle with a concave claybank. It couldn't be comfortable; there were no windows, and the claybank was certainly damp. But there was also no way for a foe to approach unseen in daylight.

Yet he must find a way. The message had been very clear -- darkness would be too late.

He was about to climb to his feet and brazen out an attack -- foolish as he knew such a move to be -- when he heard a familiar sigh from a few yards away. He blinked in surprise, then imitated the agitated cry of a disturbed rook.

A cuckoo's love call answered him. He smiled his faint smile, and backed way. In a moment, Will Scarlett and Little John joined him.

Both men were startled. They'd expected Edward, or perhaps someone else from Wickham, but not the Saracen. He was forced to repeat -- in whispers -- the story of his dream vision. In return, they told him about Robin's predicament; that explained the puzzling parts of the mercenaries' message.

"So, Robin says he doesn't want to die like that," Scarlett concluded wearily. "But I don't think he'd be too unhappy if we couldn't find Ranald, or if he just ran away. Robin says the ceremony tonight will make Ranald..."

"...or whoever..." John reminded him.

"Or whoever," Will repeated, glaring at his big companion, "into God. Robin wants to do this; he just says this is Ranald's time, that he hasn't been called."

Nasir didn't understand any more than they. "Herne said I should get Robin out of this. That means leading Ranald back, it seems."

John and Will exchanged sober looks. "We think so," the big man said.

"If he'll come," Will growled. "I can't see us dragging him back kicking and screaming."

That idea did seem a bit daunting. Finally, John shrugged. "First, we have to find him, then get him away from Gisburne. That's enough for a while. Worry about the rest later."

"Is he there?" Scarlett wondered aloud. "Is anyone? Seems awfully quiet..."

"He's likely tied up like a roasting goose," John pointed out. "And gagged. Most of the village

is out looking for him. Gisburne had better have some soldiers, or he might end up unlucky, if they find him first."

They heard a commotion from the east, and all reacted instantly, falling silent and to the ground, listening intently.

"Just get him, and come on," Gisburne's familiar constricted tenor roused their hackles. "I'm of no mind to be caught here by a mob of stinking peasants."

The band of soldiers -- ten in all, plus Gisburne and a peasant -- clattered into view. Two men-at-arms ducked into the little cottage, and emerged dragging a well-bound Ranaid, still dressed in his white robe, though now it was dirty and torn.

He'd been alone in the cot! Little John pounded a fist into the soft earth beneath him, and Scarlett cursed soundlessly as they realized their missed opportunity. Nasir did nothing; he merely waited, his attention only peripherally on Ranaid. He was much more interested in Gisburne.

Sir Guy seemed frightened, and kept most of his attention on the shadowy forest. The Saracen tensed a little, the movement not so much seen as felt by his companions. Scarlett turned to protest, but it was too late.

Nasir wasn't foolish enough to leap into the clearing, swords drawn, and take on twelve men. He'd strung his bow even before Scarlett and John joined him; now, he used it to devastating effect. So fast that at one time he had three arrows in the air simultaneously, the Saracen fired from cover, as a sniper would, with no warning.

The first arrow struck the peasant-spy Alain in the throat; he fell with a gasp and a gurgle, thrashing in his agony, and finally died. By that time, two of the soldiers had been hit, and were silently bleeding on the forest floor. The others hunted for cover, seeking almost hysterically for the source of the Apollonian rain of death.

Naturally enough, Gisburne thought first of protecting himself. He couldn't flee while his soldiers lived -- one might survive, and return to tell of it, and even he could not betray that much of the honour code of a Christian knight. Instead, he grabbed the prisoner and used him as a shield while he backed against the claybank. Bound hand and foot, and gagged, Ranaid could do little to protest such usage.

The battle swiftly proceeded to its next, inevitable step. All the soldiers had found sufficient cover, and arrows were useless. Nasir hung his bow in the tree by his head, drew his swords, and stepped out into the clearing, heading straight for Gisburne.

Above the gag, Ranaid's eyes widened in astonishment. He'd hoped for rescue -- but this black-clad warrior was a stranger, alien to the land and the people he represented. In fact, he wasn't convinced this was a rescue until he saw Little John and Will Scarlett emerge from the trees and take on the soldiers.

Nasir didn't speak. Scimitars drawn, he stalked the knight as a cat stalks a crippled mouse -- slowly, savouring the power, the control, the evidence of superiority, the victim's terror, the imminent victory.

And Gisburne's terror was plain enough, although he tried to disguise it as anger, and wasted considerable breath exhorting his men to come to his rescue. They were fairly occupied defending themselves from John and Scarlett; they had no time or attention to spare for their commander.

Ranaid saw the strange warrior's attention was focussed entirely on Gisburne, and decided to help in the only way he could -- by letting every muscle go limp. All his weight drooped against the knight's left arm. Gisburne couldn't hold both his human shield and his sword, and he was forced to let the man drop. He took a few steps away from the fallen hostage so he could move more freely, and Ranaid obligingly rolled even farther from him.

The Saracen's expression didn't change. He wasn't particularly interested in killing Guy of Gisburne. Moving slowly, like a highly deliberate border collie working a stubborn old ram, he forced the knight away from his prisoner and his men, back into the woods, just by walking toward him and changing his angle of approach whenever Gisburne tried to turn away.

Little John and Will Scarlett had also used their bows at first, and by the time they emerged from the forest, there were only five soldiers left. Five to two was still heavy odds, but the outlaws weren't burdened with armour. They were faster, and infinitely more determined to win.

* * * * *

In Brideswell, all was chaos. Most of the men were out scouring the woods for the kidnappers -- which meant that most of the trail sign was obliterated at once, leaving the hunters reduced to milling around aimlessly, with no idea where to go or where to look. The village itself was reduced to small crowds and large gangs of people who stood around and made empty threats, or simply bemoaned the loss and wondered if it meant the gods were simply irredeemably against them. Some people considered it a Christian plot to discredit and destroy the Old Ways.

Through all of it, Mathilde said nothing. She was still torn between her two selves. The priestess in her was horrified at the sacrilege, and desperately hoped someone, somehow, would find the Sacred King and return him to his apotheosis in time. The other part of her, the mortal wife, found herself wishing traitorously that Ranaid would never be found, that he might live, so she might find him again later, and they might go on with their mortal lives.

The dichotomy within her mind was so strong that she literally could not move; she sat on her bed in her cottage, and let the conflicting emotions trample her will.

She was still sitting there when the lesser priestesses arrived, and knocked on the doorframe. "Go away!" she shouted.

"My Lady, it is time to begin..."

"The King is gone. There can be no ritual."

"My Lady..." It was old Alison, the Crone. "The Chosen King has been lost to us, true, but there must be a ritual..."

"A he-goat will not do, Alison."

"We have a dark-haired wolf who will."

Mathilde shuddered. She'd seen the mark of fate on Robin's face when she first set eyes on him -- but she could not take a man unwilling... "He is not the Chosen One."

"You called, and he came," was the answer. "It was his choice."

"He is wounded..."

"The sacrifice need not be perfect, only appropriate and willing," Alison reminded her.

"He is not willing..." A last, desperate denial.

"All his band escaped," the old woman's voice answered, creaky and relentless. "He alone remains. I say he has chosen himself." Mathilde could not reply. Alison cleared her throat. "The shadows grow long, my Lady. It must be done, now."

The priestess gasped, her eyes wide open, seeing something in the air before her that no one else could see. After a moment, she blinked back tears and swallowed hard. "We shall not let evil and godlessness hold us hostage for our faith. We can Crown another King. Let Herne's Son be prepared."

* * * * *

Antlers tossed, and the leaves of the trees all around softened the sunlight to a dimming gold-green glow. The robed figure of Herne the Hunter stood above him on a knoll, both hands raised ...in protest? In invocation?

"Herne..." he acknowledged the meeting.

"You are Herne's Son in Sherwood, there to do His bidding. You are not the Great Mother's, to take as She wills."

"There is no other, Herne, and You know this is not wrong." Robin was steady and sure about that.

The hands dropped wearily to the image's sides. "It is not wrong," Herne admitted. "But yet are you Herne's Son, and so it is not right."

"It would be more wrong to lose the sacrifice," Robin said. "This I can make right, as my father once did, long ago."

"Allric's death served many," Herne commented cryptically.

"We all belong to the Great Mother, even You. For Is She not Your Mother, too?"

Whatever the Hunter might have said was lost, for just then four men burst into the little cottage. They wore white robes such as Ranauld had worn when he was taken. Robin looked up, his eyes misty from trance, and nearly smiled. Their duty was written across their young faces, but he felt very old when he recognized it. He didn't smile; this task was hard for the youngsters, and he could see that, too.

"Have you come to find your King?" he inquired quietly.

The eldest -- actually, only a year or two older than Robin, if one counted by the calendar -- swallowed uncomfortably. "The Lady says to say to you, 'It is not the King Himself that is the magick, but all power lies in the Crowning.'"

Herne's Son nodded. "She is wise, your Lady."

"It is time for the Crowning."

Robin held up his hands; two of the young men reached down, and pulled him to his feet. Leaning lightly on their support, Robin walked out into the lengthening shadows, blinking against the direct light of the westerling sun.

* * * * *

Will Scarlett stepped over the body of the last man-at-arms to fall, and used his dirk to cut Ranauld free. The erstwhile prisoner got to his feet and pulled the gag off, then brushed himself off. "I don't know you, any of you, do I?" he asked, his voice hoarse with thirst. "What brought you to my rescue?"

Little John laughed merrily. "We did it to plague Gisburne."

Ranauld turned to see what the big man saw, and had to laugh. Nasir had taken the knight somewhere, somehow, out in the woods, and was just bringing him back. Gisburne's surcoat was torn, his cloak missing, his arms bound behind him with his white knight's belt. His sword, in its scabbard, was hooked into the thrown-back mail colf, and bounced against the knightly rump as he walked. His face was grass-stained, his expression stormy. He was physically uninjured.

"Good job, Nas," Scarlett observed. "But what do we do now?"

Nasir shoved his prisoner forward into John's waiting arms, and turned to face Ranauld. "You were Chosen. Now, you choose."

"I fought for it. I won it. I want it."

The Saracen turned back to his friends. "Back to Brideswell, then, before it is too late."

Ranauld looked up at the sun, now slanting toward the west. "We must hurry."

"What about Gisburne?" Scarlett jerked his head at the baffled and angry Norman.

Ranauld grinned. "Bring him along. It will be a good lesson for him."

So it came to pass that Will Scarlett, Little John -- in charge of Sir Guy of Gisburne -- Nasir, and Ranauld marched back to Brideswell.

Meanwhile, Tuck and Marion had fallen afoul of one of the search parties in the woods. In fact, the villagers were about to cudgel the monk to death as a Christian spy when Marion intervened. The only thing she had to forestall them was her prestige as the Maiden of Sherwood, Robin Hood's wife -- but that stopped them cold, and turned them all into willing servants. They fetched and carried for her willingly, and accepted her leadership without question, letting her direct their path and the pattern of their search. They never got far from Brideswell, though; once they realized how late it was, the entire party adjourned for the village.



"Why?" Marion demanded, exasperated.

Their previous leader, a young man who introduced himself as Matthew, shrugged. "Ceremony starts soon. Don't want to miss it."

She was confused. "What ceremony?"

"Sacred Marriage, silly."

"But the King is gone..."

He shrugged. "Can always get another King. One man's much the same as another. Goddess only wants him for begettin'; once he's done that, he's of no real use. Like a bull in a cow pasture, miss."

Marion stopped short. "Is Mathilde pregnant?"

"Matters not. She isn't the Goddess; she's just the priestess."

"I don't understand," she sighed, defeated.

"Doesn't matter, miss. You weren't born to it, and I guess that makes it hard. We feel it in our bones, an' don't need to understand it. Words don't do the job of tellin'."

"You aren't supposed to tell anyone, anyway," someone else sniped from a short distance away.

Matthew shrugged again. "Words can't tell it, so it isn't oath-breakin'. Let her watch it, and she'll understand."

Marion swallowed hard, and didn't ask the question that was foremost in her thoughts. She didn't want it confirmed, however unreliably, that Robin was the likeliest candidate for the Kingship.

Despite the hours spent wandering in the woods, once they decided to head back to the village they were there in short order. "Just through these trees, miss." Matthew held a low-growing branch out of Marion's way, and she ducked under it.

When she straightened, she could see Brideswell. A large crowd had assembled in the centre of the village; in their midst was an open space around the decorated oaken pole. At the foot of the pole stood three women and a man, all dressed in white robes.

Marion caught her breath; despite the robe, she recognized that head of long, straight hair, black as ten feet down. It was surely Robin.

The youngest woman was a girl, barely twelve, her body still straight as a boy's, with only a hint of curves. The eldest was bent and stooped, and leaned on a gnarled cane, her hair a wild mane of silver-grey exploding off her skull, framing a face that looked as if it had been carved from an apple and left to shrivel. The middle woman was Mathilde.

The face of the priestess was calm, as serene as Ranaid's had been the day before. Marion blinked, frowning as she tried to make out what was going on. Then she gasped as Mathilde tied a length of robe to Robin's wrist; he held still to make her task simple. Left wrist bound, he offered her the other.

Marion began to run. She had no idea what she might accomplish -- she was outnumbered hundreds to one -- but she couldn't simply stand by and watch. The crowd didn't know her. They were thick, standing shoulder to shoulder, children held on their fathers' shoulders so they could see better. It was a hard and slow business fighting her way through. Tuck struggled along behind her, wheezing from exertion.

Both of the Hooded Man's wrists were properly bound. Mathilde took a beechwood cup from an acolyte, held it up in both hands in offering to the four cardinal directions, raised it to the sky, then spilled a libation on the earth. Silently, she offered the cup to Robin.

It had to be mistletoe wine. Marion remembered what John had said, and tried to move faster. Once he drank the wine, rescue would be futile; Robin would die anyway.

He accepted the cup, and cradled it between his palms for a moment. Then he repeated Mathilde's ritual offerings, and raised the cup to his lips...

...and a clothyard arrow whistled between the priestesses, to thunk solidly between Robin's fingers, the point embedding itself deep in the wooden cup; the momentum knocked the vessel from his hands, spilling the wine.

Startled, Robin looked up; the crowd rumbled uneasily. And there, on the little knoll where Ranaid had prayed to the moon, he stood again. Beside him was the dark, shadowy figure of Nasir, who was just lowering his bow. The villagers turned, saw Ranaid standing there, tall and straight and backed by an armed escort, and a roar of delight went up. No one had been happy or entirely satisfied with the idea of a substitute for the Chosen Sacred King.

Marion's attention was on Robin. She saw his shoulders slump -- just a bit, and just for a moment.

The crowd split before the advance of the King, and in a moment, the King and the Prince of Sherwood stood face to face. Robin held out his bound wrists, and Ranaid untied the knots. Then he offered his wrists in turn, and Robin bound him as he himself had been bound. The two men studied one another for a long moment, then embraced. Tears brimming in his eyes, Robin stepped back and dropped to one knee.

"Long live the King!" the crowd thundered.

Then Mathilde stepped forward, holding a ram's horn. She offered it as she had offered the cup, then worried the stopper out with her teeth. She held it over Ranaid's head -- she had to stand on tiptoe -- and poured some of the oil the horn contained, so it ran down his face and neck.

"I anoint thee King!"

"Long live the King!" the crowd roared once more.

The four young men who had summoned Robin stepped forward, carrying drawn knives. Little John, standing just outside the "stage," swallowed hard, thinking the blooding was about to begin.

But it was not so. The men positioned themselves around Ranaid, who stood unmoving, his bound hands hanging easily before him, his eyes half closed.

"Clothe the King in royal raiment!" one of the acolytes cried on a cue from Mathilde.

The four advanced, and slashed Ranaid's once-white robe to ribbons. They were careful not to nick him, but when they were done, he stood clad in a fall of tattered white ribbons. More than half the fabric of his robe lay in a ragged heap around his ankles.

Their task completed, the four men moved back. "Long live the King!" the crowd affirmed.

A priestess had retrieved the fallen cup and pried Nasir's arrow from it. Now, having refilled it, she presented it to Mathilde.

She took the cup with no visible reaction. This was the point of no return. Until now, Ranaid could have changed his mind -- or tried to, at least. But once he partook of the cup, he was irrevocably committed.

She again offered the cup to the six directions, then to him. He took it gravely, repeated the offerings, then stood motionless for a long, tense moment. A thousand people watched, and no one made a sound. He had to drink of his own free will, or the sacrifice was no more than butchery.

Someone gasped as he raised the cup to his lips. When he swallowed, a thousand throats went dry. He drained the cup in one long pull, and upturned it over his head to show them all that he had drunk it to the dregs. A thousand voices exploded into cheers.

While the uproar crested around them, Robin and the Four led Ranaid to the post; they used the ropes dangling from it to tie him -- securely, but not too tightly -- to it. He stood with his back against the raw bark, and said nothing. His eyes were unfocussed, his attention elsewhere.

"The dance! The dance!"

Thirteen couples separated themselves from the crowd, and stepped forward hand in hand. They formed a ring around their imprisoned King.

The men took the ribbons dangling from the crown of the pole; the women took hold of the ropes, one in each hand. Drums began to beat out a dance rhythm, one other folk would one day call a

"slow bransle" or a "brawl."

The dance was similar to the Maypole dance, full of swirls and flourishes -- but, rather than gaily, these thirteen couples danced with solemnity. As they danced, their movements around the post and interweaving with one another plaited the ribbons and ropes around both the King and the pole, making him fast to it. Ranaid could barely lift a finger by the time they were done.

While the thirteen pairs danced, the little band of outlaws from Sherwood drew together. They greeted one another -- and especially Robin -- with fervent hugs. Marion hugged him so hard he had to loosen her grip just to breathe. They were all there but Much -- and there was no way to ask where he was; the drumbeat and the chanting of a thousand voices made conversation impossible. They could only hope he was somewhere safe in the crowd.

The last lengths of rope and ribbon were tied at the King's ankles, and the dancers spun away, disappearing into the crowd. The King stared out at the people, not seeing them at all, seeing something denied to them.

The chanting went on, the drumbeat echoing the pulse pounding in every skull. Mathilde swayed to the rhythm, and walked slowly toward her man. With every movement, with every step, she tantalized the prisoner. She walked up to him, and rubbed her body seductively against his. She reached up and caressed his face, and finally kissed him, long and thoroughly.

The King didn't respond; she might not have been there at all.

The affront was obvious, her response violent; she thrust herself from him, her back stiff with anger; she tossed her head, and took a threshing flail from the ground behind her. Then she turned, and slashed with it at his body. He didn't react to that either, although the sweep was of boiled leather, and nearly as stiff as wood. Furious, she turned and stalked away, hurling the flail aside.

Marion stared, shocked, as another priestess approached the King and repeated the entire procedure, exactly as Mathilde had done. She thought she was beginning to understand.

One after another, the priestesses took their turns. It was the youngest one, the twelve-year-old, who drew first blood when she was ignored; she stabbed him with her spindle. Blood flowed from the wound -- a minor one in his upper arm -- and the watching crowd growled.

Even surrounded by his friends, the sight unnerved Nasir. His arm still ached, and he could see what was surely coming. He decided he didn't want to see the rest, and moved to quietly slip away.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him, and he turned. It was Robin, of course. He looked solemn, but his eyes glowed. He leaned close so the Saracen could hear him above the drums and the chanting. "Nasir...please. Stay?"

The Saracen glanced at the King, who had been struck several more times now, and was bleeding from several wounds. Then he looked back at his leader, disbelief plain on his face.

Robin nodded; he understood. "Please?" he repeated.

The drums picked up their beat; Nasir had to fight to not give in, to not surrender to the hypnotic rhythm. He didn't understand, but he trusted Robin. He hesitated another moment, then reluctantly nodded. He would stay.

Robin smiled his thanks, and went back to Marion's side.

She was shivering -- but she was watching. He stood beside her, and put an arm around her. She leaned against him. Nasir came and stood on her other side, at least as interested in Robin's reactions as in what they watched.

The women had stopped approaching their target now; they merely threw things -- mostly rocks, but also the occasional bodkin or dagger. Not every missile struck; not every weapon cut. But many did, and the King's body was soaked with blood. One rock had struck his forehead, and the blood running down his face cemented one eye shut.

As the drumbeat accelerated, the barrage became heavier. Larger rocks were thrown, and more knives. Then someone launched a crossbow bolt that struck the King in the thigh, just as Robin had been wounded those weeks past. The Hooded Man flinched as if he'd been hit again, and Marion tightened her hold on him.

Robin's attention was fixed on the King. Marion glanced up at him, worried, then looked at Nasir. The Saracen was worried, too. Something entranced Robin, holding his attention, and neither of them could figure it out. They turned back to regard the King.

Ranald bled from dozens of wounds. If not for the ribbon across his forehead that held his head up, surely his chin would have sunk onto his chest. Several knives were embedded in his flesh, and the crossbow bolt had pierced his leg, pinning it to the oaken pole.

No man could take such punishment unmoved. The cuts and stab wounds alone were dangerously severe, and more were inflicted every moment. The stoning was heavy enough to break bones and bruise to the soul. Yet, Ranald's expression was as calm and serene as it had been the morning they'd met. Tears ran down his cheeks -- but they were manifestly not tears of pain, for a half-smile played about his lips. His eyes were focussed elsewhere.

Marion glanced again at Robin. His expression was identical to the one Ranald wore. Frightened -- for it was plain Ranald was dying -- she looked again to Nasir for help. But the Saracen, too, was entranced, swaying to the drumbeat, lips moving in silent accompaniment to the chant, eyes seeing something denied her. She held Robin tightly, determined not to lose him; he didn't seem to notice.

Then, abruptly, he grabbed her arm so tightly it hurt, and his fingers left bruises. "Look!" he whispered intensely. "Marion, look!"

Her gasp was echoed from hundreds of throats. The rain of missiles faltered, then ceased.

A ball of golden light slowly descended from the sky toward the King. His eyes were fixed on it, his lips curved in an incredulous, incandescent smile. As they watched, he began to glow with the same golden brilliance.

The breath froze in a thousand pairs of lungs as the King effortlessly stepped away from the pole to which he had been bound, and mounted the air as if climbing a marble staircase. The chanting died, and the drumbeat failed as he stepped up, and up, and up, until the golden ball of light engulfed him, and up, and up...

And he was gone.

There was a long, long silence. Finally, the crowd began to breathe again, and to stir. Robin sighed, and pulled Marion close with a gentle, affectionate touch that reminded her of the repletion after love. Nasir shuddered, and turned away.

"Nasir...?" Robin's voice was low, concerned.

The Saracen stopped, but did not turn. The Hooded Man went to him, walking around his friend to stand facing him.

Nasir studied him for a long time. Then he looked at the oaken pole, where the body of a dead man stood slumped against blood-stained ribbon, held in place with gory rope. When he looked back, Robin was smiling.

"Nasir, do you understand now? I want to die like that. I want it desperately. But this was not my time, and I knew it all along. When my turn comes, I'll know that, too, and I'll tell you."

The Saracen looked stricken. "We... I could not do this to you...!"

The Hooded Man chuckled. "Don't worry. I'm sure the Sheriff will provide what I'll need. It'll be all right, Nasir. I promise."

The other man was still shaken. Robin grinned, and hugged him fiercely. "Don't worry, Nasir," he repeated. "It won't be for a while. I'm having too much fun now."

Then he broke away, and went to gather up the rest of his band; the Saracen stood and watched him go. Somehow, he wasn't cheered by Robin's happiness. But every day they lived free was another day this could be avoided. He pulled himself together, and threaded his way through the crowd to wait for the others at the edge of the woods.

* * * * *

Much collapsed under an ash tree and tried to catch his breath. He'd fled into the woods on Robin's command, and had been separated from the others almost at once. All afternoon, he'd been so busy dodging search parties from Brideswell that he'd had no time to actively hunt for Ranaid himself.

As the sun slanted toward the west, he realized that everyone he encountered was headed in the same direction. Curious, he followed along, turning aside only to find a pool for a drink. By the time he'd slaked his thirst, the woods were deserted. Without a guide, and with every track and path completely trampled by the sheer volume of traffic throughout the day, he had to feel his way toward the village. His sense of direction completely deserted him, and he had no idea where Brideswell lay. The sun was almost at the horizon when he finally found it.

The village looked like an anthill that had been dug up; people milled about in all directions, most of them carrying things. Much couldn't figure it out -- but then, a good deal of detail wasn't visible from his hiding place at the edge of the common, for the only available light was a ring of torches near the centre of the village. Since the centre of that ring was the only place where the light was bright enough to see, that was where he looked. He saw the tall oak post -- but there was something different about it...

Much gasped in horror as four men in white robes cut down a nearly naked, bloodied body, a body that was unmistakably dead. The dark-maned head lolled over the shoulder of one of the four; the young watcher caught his breath in a sob. "Robin...? Robin...?" he whimpered. "That's Robin..."

Tears blinded him, and he couldn't see to aim an arrow at the murderers. Impatient, he tossed his bow aside, grabbed his knife, and began to run toward the four men. Everyone else was scurrying about with loads of wood; no one paid any attention to the grief-stricken young man until he was within yards of the small group gathered around the body. Then someone shouted something, and a strong arm grabbed him around the waist.

Snarling, Much turned, weapon raised -- and stopped abruptly. The knife dropped from nerveless fingers. Little John had caught him -- and Robin stood, hale and hearty, right beside him. The Hooded Man smiled gently, his eyes twinkling with affection and understanding.

It was all too overwhelming. Much threw himself at his foster brother, sobbing. Robin held him close, smoothing the curly mop of hair. "It's all right, Much. I'm here... It's all right..."

"I thought that was you, an'...an'..."

"I know. Did you see the rite? Did you see what happened to Ranaid?" Robin held him at arm's length, and Much shook his head.

"No," the boy said, knuckling at his eyes. "I just saw 'em cutting 'im down, an' I thought it was you, Robin..." He choked again, and his foster brother hugged him.

"I wish you'd seen it, Much. I wanted you to see it."

"Why?" he asked, confused by Robin's anxious tone.

"Words can't describe such things, Much. You have to see, to feel, to be part of it. I'm sorry you missed this one."

The Hooded Man turned away, plainly disturbed, to watch the Four and several priestesses as they prepared the body for the funeral. Much glanced at the bloody, mangled thing, and looked away with a shudder. He saw Little John and Will Scarlett carrying wood, and went to help them, throwing a last confused look over his shoulder at his foster brother.

"Maybe Will can tell me what happened..."

Wrapped up in his own thoughts, Robin paid no attention. Marion had gone to find Nasir; they needed more help to keep the crowd from pressing forward and hampering the work that needed to be done. The Hooded Man found himself acting in a supervisory capacity; Ranaid had been the village's headman, and everyone had been so involved in the ceremony that no one considered what would happen when their leader left them.

Will, John, Much, and several dozen villagers stacked firewood into a magnificent funeral pyre. Robin had his own idea about how this part of the ritual should go, and collared his men as quickly as he could to arrange it.

When Nasir came back, following Marion like a dog at heel, his leader drew him aside. "Will you, Nasir? You were a part of it; Much didn't see, and I need four. You, me, John, and Will."

The Saracen hesitated. "Is it a sin to do a man honour, when he died for his beliefs and for his people?" Robin asked shrewdly. He didn't know a lot about Nasir's faith, but easily guessed that was the reason for the Saracen's reluctance.

His friend considered for a few more moments, then shook his head. "It is not a sin to do a man honour," he said at last. "And he died bravely."

"Thank you, Nasir."

Complete, the pyre was twelve paces long, six wide at the top, and wider at the base; it stood more than eight feet tall. The bloody body of the King, wrapped in a new white shroud -- that showed bloodstains, for the body was so fresh -- was carried up onto the pyre by the Four, and laid carefully in the centre. The sun had set; the area was torch-lit. At the four sides of the pyre, standing around it, were the four oldest priestesses, each holding a torch. Mathilde, who hadn't been seen since striking her first blow, reappeared, picked up another torch, lit it from the one Old Alison held as she stood at the western edge, and raised it high.

The crowd fell silent.

"The King is dead!" Mathilde cried, her voice clear and strong, carrying to the edges of her audience.

"Long live the King!" came the thundering acclamation.

From the four cardinal points of the compass, from the outer edges of the crowd, came four fire arrows. They arched up, over the onlookers, and reached almost equal heights as they crested; then they dove into the pyre, where their flames flickered, then caught on the dry kindling. Mathilde tossed her torch up with them, and the crones around the edges set their own torches to kindling secreted at the base of the pyre. The flame roared to life.

A wordless cheer rose from the crowd. Marion, Tuck, and Much stood together near the edge of the firelight, waiting. In time, the four archers -- Robin, Nasir, Will, and John -- found their way through the throng to join them. Marion hugged Robin tightly, and he swayed in weariness.

Even Tuck noticed.

"Here, now, it's been a long day, and you've not eaten a thing, lad. We've supper all ready..." He led the outlaw band aside, into the darkness away from the pyre.

Sure enough, the monk had been busy. Around a tiny campfire, he had strips of royal venison roasting on spits, and a winesack lay warming near the fire. There were also a loaf of fresh bread and a wooden bowl of apples, pears, and onions, along with cups for everyone. He'd even laid out their blankets in a familiar pattern, so they could fall asleep over their meal if they chose.

"Tuck, you're wonderful," Robin sighed, dropping down on his bedroll. Marion sank down beside him, but slapped his hand lightly when he reached for a spit of meat.

"You just lie still and rest," she ordered. "I'll get it for you."

"You afraid I'll fall into the fire?" he asked mildly, not at all offended.

She glanced at the pyre, and shuddered. He grabbed her by her skirt, and tumbled her down onto his blankets. She squealed, then giggled, kissed him lightly, and sat up.

"You still need to build up your strength," she told him didactically. "Here..."

She handed him a spit of venison and an apple. Tuck broke the bread apart and tossed them each a chunk. The meal progressed in silence for some time.

Suddenly, Will straightened. "Nas, John..."

They looked at him questioningly, and he grinned back at them. "Gisburne."

John guffawed, and even Nasir smiled. Robin and the others looked confused. "Gisburne?" the Hooded Man demanded. "What about him?"

"Nas captured him when we found Ranald," John explained. "Ranald didn't want him disturbing things here, so we trussed him up, and left him tied to a tree up on the edge of the common. So he could see, but so he couldn't interfere, you see. It was Ranald's idea."

"And he's still up there?" Marlon asked incredulously.

"Aye."

Robin stretched. "I feel magnanimous. Fetch him down; let's invite him to dinner."

"What?" Scarlett blinked. "An' go traipsing off in the woods? After dark? No, no...there's beasties an' outlaws an' such out there. He'll keep till sun-up."

Marlon snuggled against Robin's chest, and he sighed. "I suppose..."

"Here, have some more venison..."

Up on the hill, the night was very long, very uncomfortable -- and very, very dark.



FROM THE AUTHORS: MARY ROBERTSON

When I was invited to participate in THE SACRIFICIAL KING, I was excited, intrigued, but somewhat apprehensive as well. I'd written in the ROBIN OF SHERWOOD universe; I'd even visited Sherwood Forest one cold, rainy September Saturday. But what did I have to say that hadn't already been said by others? What insights could I bring to the subject?

I thought, read, made any number of false starts before finding what I wanted, as is so often the case within my own experience. I was raised Catholic, during a time when the Mass was still in Latin, when ecumenism was still years distant. For my European-born mother and her family, the priest's word was law, the Church was incapable of error, and my own natural skepticism was more than a little embarrassing. At that time, one did not question the Church's dictates, any more than one asked why the sky was blue. It simply was.

While centuries separate my childhood from the time of Robin and Marion, the Church has not changed so very much, and although the Church and I parted ways many years ago, the memories and feelings remain.

Marion, too, grew up under the watchful eye of Mother Church. How must she have felt to discover that her husband's religion, so poorly regarded by that Church, so little understood, cared for all the land's people -- something her own faith espoused in theory, but all too seldom in practice. Robin's gods were real; they spoke to him directly, asking his loyalty, his service, and finally even his life.

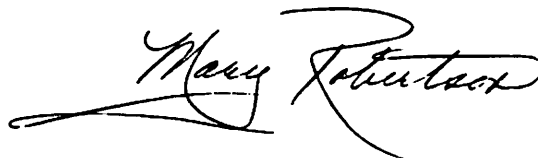
In ROBIN OF SHERWOOD, we often see Marion the woman, Marion the wife, Marion the Lady of Sherwood. But what of Marion the outsider, Marion the Christian, Marion who was to become a nun?

However much she might have tried to believe as her husband did, she never really renounced her childhood faith. How did she feel when Robin told her he would some day be killed, his blood spilled for the sake of a land and its people, not in fair combat but as willing sacrifice?

It was that Marion I wanted to find -- the Christian who denied her flesh-and-blood husband's right to a rôle she had been taught belonged solely to the son of her god, the woman who wanted desperately to understand what her upbringing said was unacceptable.

I've tried to convey a little of the inner conflict that was to colour her relationship with Robert of Huntingdon, that finally drove her back to the safety of a Church where blind acceptance was good and right. In exploring Marion's mind and heart, maybe I've even learned a little about my own.

I hope so.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mary Robertson". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

"The Shape of Shadows"

(By Mary Robertson)

The rôle of hero comes easily enough. Being the son of a high-born Norman lord, I learned responsibility right along with riding and the alphabet. And safe-guarding villagers isn't so very different from managing an estate. The source of supply might change, but the basics -- food, clothing, shelter, protection from enemies -- those are constant.

What I never expected in my new rôle as Defender of Sherwood was...Loxley.

In my vanity, or pride, or perhaps naïveté, I imagined I'd be welcomed to Sherwood with open arms. After all, didn't I rescue their little outlaw band from the High Sheriff of Nottingham? Instead, I was pummelled and provoked, and generally forced to prove my worthiness -- hardly the sort of welcome to which I was accustomed.

At first, I was too busy to notice the shadow of my predecessor looming large behind me. But, as I settled into my new life, his presence became increasingly difficult to ignore.

The loyalty and love Loxley still engenders within his former followers isn't unexpected, although it is far stronger than I might have imagined, given the passage of time. Marion was his wife, after all, and Much his foster brother. If the tales are true, John owed him his life. Such ties hold strong even beyond death, and I can appreciate their suspicions, however uncomfortable.

But the villagers, the children... They, too, study me with cold, questioning eyes, and it has little to do with my noble birth. It's as if they hold a secret I can never share. Robin of Loxley belongs to them -- but in some strange way, he belongs to me as well, a ghost who lingers always just beyond my sight.

Who was he? What was he, that he could inspire such devotion in his followers, such fanatical hatred in his foes?

His enemies are mine now; I can hardly ask them. Herne, the skin-clad madman who first drew me to this place, speaks in riddles; I can find no answers there, only more questions. The villagers? I stand in their beloved Robin's place; wary, they haven't yet learned to trust someone they see as an outsider.

I am left with only the outlaws of Sherwood, Loxley's inner circle, and those most reluctant to share their memories -- particularly with the usurper who never even met the man behind the legend. I've been accepted, true, but it's a grudging acceptance based on little more than the word of a half-crazed hermit. The outlaws see him in another light; that, too, I cannot comprehend.

Foolishly, perhaps, I chose to approach Scarlett first, thinking his were the ties of mere comradeship. His fists apprised me of my mistake.

I think Nasir understands, and might have acquainted me with the man who was once his friend -- but he lacks the language to do so.

Finally, it was Tuck who drew me aside. "Come on, lad," he said one day, laying a sturdy hand on my shoulder. "You and I need to do some fishing."

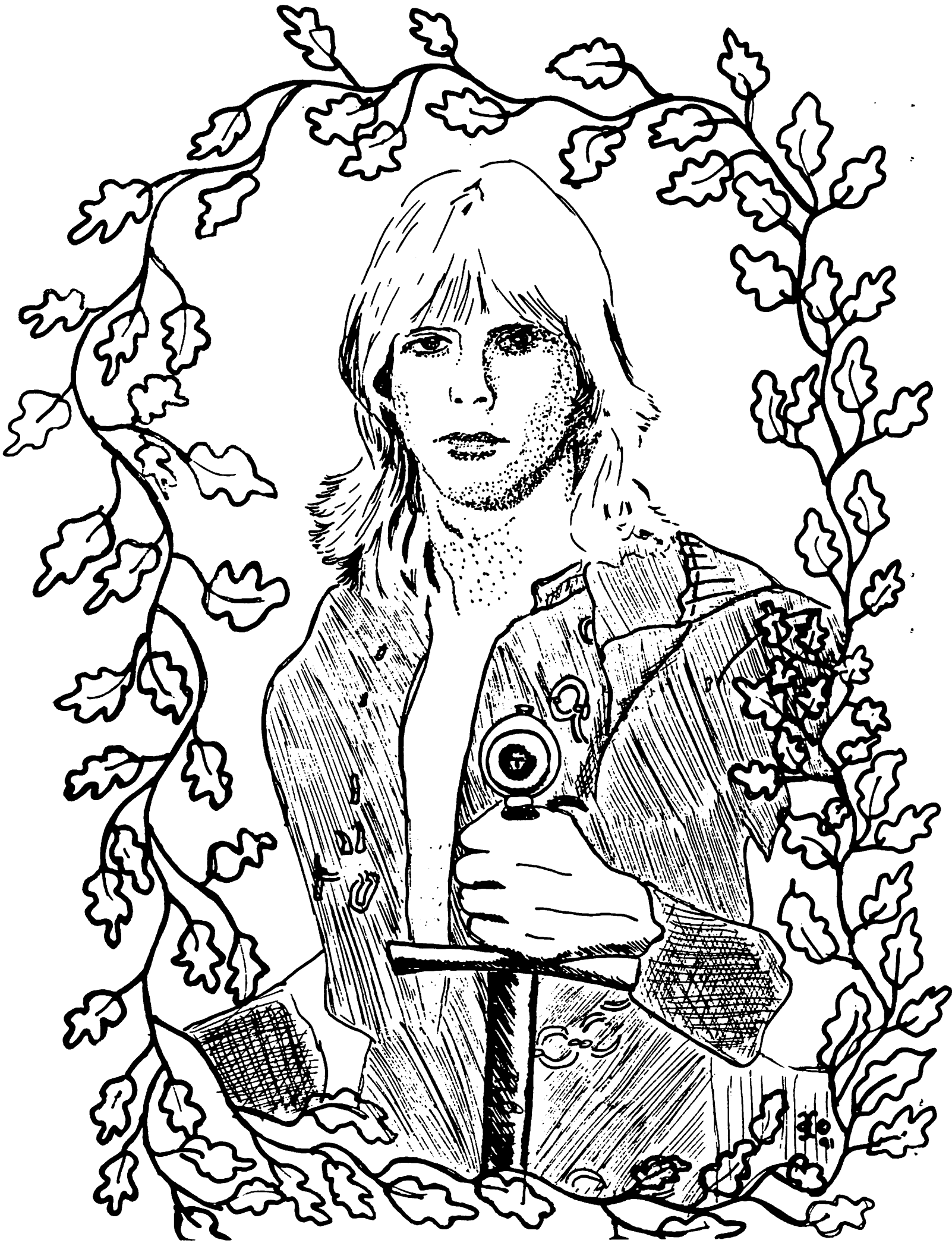
"Fishing?" I returned. "But..."

I wasn't really in the mood to spend a morning on the river bank, but Brother Tuck can be most persistent.

In moments, I realized we were headed in the wrong direction. "Tuck," I protested, slowing to a halt, "the river's that way."

"That's right, my son," he beamed, looking for all the world like an overgrown cherub masquerading as a monk. "Some of Nasir's lessons must be rubbing off. Today, we're after different fish."

He hesitated. "You've been asking questions, Robert, about...Robin. It's a thing you need to



know, but Will and John and Much, they aren't ready to tell you yet. They may never be." He read the question in my eyes. "No, I'm not the one to explain. I'm taking you to someone who can."

In silence, we made our way through the farther reaches of Sherwood, until, "Marion?"

She stood in the path ahead, a flower amid a tangle of green. She hugged Tuck in welcome and, taking my outstretched hands in both her own, led us to a secluded spot beside a shallow stream. "Robert, oh, how good it is to see both of you. Are you well?"

"I am, my lady. We all are. And you?"

She sighed. "After Sherwood, I'm afraid I find the life of a...lady...confining. But Father is pleased. Come, sit down." She patted a length of fallen log opposite her chosen perch.

"Little Flower..." Tuck began, sounding uncharacteristically subdued.

"It's all right, Tuck, I know. Robin." She stopped. Even sad and distant, she was beautiful. At length, she rose and, motioning us to remain where we were, paced along the stream's edge.

"You will not believe me, Robert," she began at last. "You never met Robin. But, listen, and perhaps, if you understand nothing else, you will understand why we did not tell you.

"Like you, I was raised a Christian, and even before Belleme's offer of marriage, I welcomed the safety of the Church. The religious life was peaceful and ordered, and certainly a more welcome fate than becoming the property of some oafish minor noble -- or, worse, some obscure relative of Robert de Rainault! In either case, my lands would fall into the Sheriff's hands, and his brother's.

"No, if I was to become chattel, at least my fate as a nun was assured.

"Then Robin came. He burst into my room at Nottingham Castle, an escaped prisoner being chased by Sir Guy. He was just a peasant -- but there was something so strange, so different about him, a wildness, like an untamed colt feeling the weight of the saddle.

"I remember asking where he would go, if he would be safe. Sherwood, he told me, and yes, he knew the wood; he would be safe, even at night.

"He knew the wood. I didn't understand what he meant, not then.

"I thought I'd never see him again, but he attacked the soldiers escorting me to Kirklee's. Once more, we met because of Gisburne -- Gisburne, who'd murdered Robin's foster father, and would gladly have performed the same service for the foster son.

"Another man might have sought revenge. Robin sent Sir Guy back to Nottingham with a warning against future trespass.

"He asked me to marry him that day, but I was afraid -- afraid of his strangeness, afraid of what my life might become were I to stay. So I continued to Kirklee's. The second time he asked, I was still afraid -- but I was more afraid of living without him.

"You've heard all the stories, I'm sure, the ones they tell in Nottingham and Lincoln, about the wolf's head of Sherwood Forest. Some of them are even true. Some, though, you will never hear on the streets of the towns.

"I said I was a Christian. It never occurred to me that Robin was not. He followed other ways, old ways. His gods lived in the trees and the streams -- and in men, when the aspect of the God was upon them. You needn't look so surprised. The Church doesn't have so strong a hold here as she claims.

"We were wed twice, Robin and I. Tuck joined us strongly enough to suit even the Archbishop. Herne officiated at our other wedding. We spent our first days together here, beside this stream.

"I think Robin hadn't been a child for a very long time, and so we were children together. He wove flowers for my hair, and taught me to sit motionless until the wild creatures came to my hand. And we taught each other the ways of man and woman. But childhood cannot last, so the wolf's head returned with his bride to the heart of Sherwood.

"In my innocence, our lives at first seemed ordinary -- or, at least, as ordinary as the lives of outlaws may be. But as the days stretched into months, I noticed Robin went more and more often to Herne, returning sober and thoughtful, even distant.

"I noticed, too, the people of Wickham and of the Forest's other villages. They always offered our band a certain respect, but toward Robin, their respect became a kind of admiration bordering on reverence. It was unnerving. And Robin seemed not to notice.

"Looking back, I see that magick, old magick, played a part in even our early life together, however much I wanted to pretend otherwise. I tried at first to believe that Belleme's defeat was no more than fortunate chance, love overcoming all obstacles. But I was deceiving myself. Only magick could defeat the evil he embraced. When I could no longer deny that truth, I thought of Herne -- elusive, powerful when he chose, and caring enough of Robin to name him son.

"But it was Much, sweet, simple Much, who opened my eyes to the truth I refused to see.

"We'd gone to Wickham. Maude and Michael's oldest girl was marrying a young man from one of Sherwood's northernmost villages, and both parents and children had requested our attendance. All day, I noticed their glances, but the newly joined pair didn't approach us until dusk. I thought at first they were in search of Edward, Wickham's headman, who sat nearby; but they passed him, to halt before Robin.

"The boy stammered his welcome, then softly, timidly, asked if Robin was in truth Herne's Chosen. At Robin's nod, he said something I shall remember always. 'I am not of Wickham, my lord, but I am of Sherwood, and I would pledge to you.'

"Robin studied him for a long moment before nodding again. Only Tuck's restraining hand held me to my seat. The other guests seemed unsurprised when my husband took the young man's hands between both his own and listened to his oath, but I was horrified. This silent, dignified, kingly man was not he whom I had wed; he was a stranger with my beloved husband's face.

"We fought long and bitterly that night, Robin and I. He found my anger as incomprehensible as I found his calm acceptance of what I saw as unreasoning hero worship. 'What next?' I demanded. 'Will you declare yourself the king of Sherwood?'

"His silence was my only answer. I lay awake far into the night, and, with the coming of dawn, I left. I had to get away, to sort out the feelings our argument had stirred. Sherwood held many secrets; Robin, it seemed, held more.

"I walked the forest paths for long hours. It mattered little where I went, so I paid scant attention. I just walked. And I found myself here.

"Then He came. Herne, Robin's friend and mentor -- and, so it seemed to me, the source of his strangeness. I raged; He stood listening, until my flood of words abated.

"'Child,' He said into the calm that followed, 'you love your husband, but you do not yet know him. Each man has a path to walk in life; few recognize it. Robin has seen his path, and the seeing has changed him. Just as Sherwood's face must change with the passing seasons, so must the face of Sherwood's King. When you have learned the meaning of that Kingship, only then will you truly know him.' And, as suddenly as He'd appeared, Herne was gone, leaving me confused and frightened.

"Then someone else came to disturb me. Much blundered into the clearing, with the air of a little boy having been caught teasing the dogs. 'Did Robin send you to find me?' I asked.

"'He's worried, you know,' he defended his foster brother. 'How come you left?'

"'I needed time to think.' He didn't know how to answer that; the concept was foreign to someone who spent his days constantly in motion. 'Much,' I ventured into the silence, 'tell me about Robin.' He looked puzzled. 'What was he like as a child?'

"'Oh! He were always goin' off into the forest, thinkin' like you, but when he came home...' He launched into tales of his much-loved foster brother that might have been hair-raising had I not already known their outcome. What emerged was a portrait of a child who grew into manhood the day his father was killed, who loved fiercely and fully, and who never killed without provocation or need, who would give everything for those under his protection.

"Something in Much's narrative caught my attention. 'He told me he saw things sometimes, but he didn't want nobody to know. He were afraid the priests would find out, even if we didn't pray to

their gods.'

"Robin...what?'

"He Saw things, Robin did. He still does, when Herne comes to him.'

"Much, is Robin the King of Sherwood?'

"Course he is. Herne Chose him, didn't he?'

"What I learned from Much led me to see Robin as a sort of priest himself, a living symbol of his people's religious belief; their deference was a gesture of respect for the office. I knew little of the old ways, and there was little time to learn in our daily struggle for survival.

"I returned to our camp with Much that night, and when time permitted, I questioned my elusive mate. He never denied my questions, never refused to answer, but I cannot say I always understood.

"Understanding came on a hill not far from here, when Robin offered me his sword Albion, and said goodbye. I have yet to find meaning."

Marion faced me now, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. "Do you understand, Robert? Robin was a sacrifice, a king killed for the sake of his land, his people, and it was his choice."

Tuck, silent throughout her story, spoke at last. "There are precedents in your own religion, my son."

"My religion?"

He shrugged, offering an apologetic smile. "Our religion, then. I have found that intent, not ritual, is what matters. Sacrifice for the greater good has meaning, whatever its name. Robin's death was a gift, freely given. I accept it. Marion cannot."

A chill coursed down my spine. Would such a sacrifice be expected of me as well? Is death the meaning of the title I inherited? I wasn't wrong; the people of Sherwood do hold secrets I can never share, not really. Willingly would I spend my life fighting injustice -- but I do not think I could give up that life as my predecessor did.

"Robert," Tuck interrupted my swirling thoughts, "you are Robin in th' Hood now -- but you are not Robin of Loxley. No one expects you to be."

Marion laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I know why you first came to Sherwood, Robert, and I wish I could share your love. But, for now, at least, I cannot. Robin was my first, perhaps my only love. And until I lay his ghost to rest, until I 'know' him... You have gifts, skills that Robin didn't share. Sherwood needs you -- but it needs you to live, not to die like Robin. It will not accept an unwilling sacrifice."

I wonder.



"Edward's Tale"

(By Mary Robertson)

When I was first told the Horned One had chosen Robin of Loxley to be His son, I was puzzled. Herne wore the aura of godhood like a second skin -- but Robin?

I had watched him grow from frightened child to intense young man, his lean frame concealing the iron strength of long hours spent working at his foster father's mill -- when he worked. He was always given to brooding, and frequently disappeared into Sherwood for days at a time. The miller often despaired of his ever settling into an honest trade.

Was this, then, Herne's Choice?

Robin surprised me. He gathered about himself as headstrong a collection of comrades as ever I'd seen -- yet they obeyed him at a word. His Lady was high-born -- but never did I hear her complain about living conditions the peasant women of Wickham would not tolerate. He followed the Old Ways -- yet numbered among his closest friends both a Christian monk and a Saracen warrior.

He was a contradiction, a wolf's head, yes, and a true son of the Forest God.

Robin and his friends came often to Wickham, sometimes seeking our aid, but more often bringing gifts of food or captured coin to supplement our meagre existence. They played with the children, exchanged news with the men, dallied with the women. They celebrated our joys, and shared our sorrows.

Indeed, as we came to know and accept them, the outlaws of Sherwood -- and especially Robin of Loxley, now known as Robin in th' Hood -- became an integral part of our feasts and festivals. Robin sometimes wondered at the dangers we risked in entertaining a known wolf's head -- but when it was possible, he came.

As time passed, the outlaw band gained a reputation that spread beyond the confines of Sherwood. The Norman nobles saw them as a threat to their uncontested domination of England; the Saxons saw them as saviours, Saxon heroes for Saxon peasants. For myself, while I had long accepted that Robin served the Horned One in some manner, it was still difficult for me to see him as other than a highly effective outlaw leader -- and a friend.

I well remember when I first recognized that other Robin -- the Robin who belonged to Herne. It was during the time of the Blessing, in Wickham. Perhaps someone told the High Sheriff in Nottingham we shed no blood during that sacred season, or perhaps it was mere misfortune. For whatever reason, our Norman overlord once again sent his steward Sir Guy of Gisburne and a troop of ruffians into the forest to hunt Robin Hood and the outlaw band.

Robin and his followers trapped them, and bound them. We thought we left them safely behind in Wickham while we proceeded to our celebrations. But we were mistaken. They escaped, and followed us. And when, in due course, the Horned One appeared, they fired upon him.

With Herne's appearance, Robin's men were no longer constrained from bloodshed, and they gave chase. Robin himself had eyes only for the man who sometimes wore the aspect of the Horned One. The wolf's head knelt -- and when he arose, it was with the face of the Hunter. Robin's Lady had helped him don the antlered crown, and we watched him lure the leader of our attackers into the night.

But it was not the mere outward trappings of a god that shook me to the core of my being. There was an...aura about him, an aura of otherness I had never encountered before.

It was like the god aspect of Herne, but somehow different. And its strength frightened me. Yet Marion, Nasir, Much, and the others -- even the wounded Herne himself -- took no notice. And when Robin returned, he was only himself again.

Herne's Choosing became ever more obvious from that day, at least to me. At first, Robin seemed no different than before. But then his eyes would cloud at odd moments, and the otherness would wash across his face -- but so quickly as to be mistaken for simple distraction. The pull grew stronger with time, and Death was written there for any with eyes to see.



And when the Call came, Robin of Loxley was ready.

There is a new Hooded Man in Sherwood now, a new Robin in th' Hood, and he is as like to Loxley as the day to the night, the sun to the moon. He, too, is a son of Herne -- but he is Called to other tasks, tasks more suited to the son of a noble than to a peasant with a fire in his heart.

Robin died long ago. Yet, sometimes, when the wind is right, I could swear I hear him still, calling from the edge of the wood. Perhaps he haunts Sherwood now, the place he loved more than life.

Or perhaps it is as his friends are so fond of repeating: Nothing is ever forgotten.



"Husband"

(By Mary Robertson)

His youth conceals the years writ in his eyes,
So somber, and mysterious, and strange,
And though I know he holds me still in heart,
Each passing season brings on him a change.

He hears the forest singing in the night,
A lullaby of blood and steel's embrace;
Its melody sighs softly through his dreams,
Awakening some otherworldly face.

Each night, I guard the Guardian of this wood,
And wonder at the turning of the way
That brought me to lie wakeful at his side,
To soothe his sleep, to hold my hurts at bay.

Sometimes, I am afraid of what he is --
For, what he is, I do not understand --
This husband who is stranger more than friend,
This forest King bound ever to his land.



FROM THE AUTHORS: LISA MUDANO

One of the things that has always fascinated me about Richard Carpenter's telling of ROBIN OF SHERWOOD is the number of deeply Christian characters whose lives he has integrally woven into what is so obviously a pagan story. As Carpenter tells it, Robin Hood was the quintessential "sacrificial king" -- at the same time priest and ruler, chosen by the Horned God to be His Son and represent the potential divinity in every mortal man.

The irony comes into play when we realize that while Robin of Loxley was raised in the Old Faith, and as a result, has at least an instinctive understanding of the rôle he is called by Herne to play, others like Marion -- and later Robert -- have no way of comprehending the parts fate summons them to assume. The Christian Church during this time actively sought to suppress all knowledge and practice of the pagan faiths. As a result, until coming to Sherwood, Robert and Marion would likely have known of Herne the Hunter only in the guise of the Christian Devil.

Up until now, I have concentrated my ROBIN OF SHERWOOD writings on Marion and her rôle as Goddess-on-Earth. But when I was approached about creating a tale for THE SACRIFICIAL KING, my thoughts turned surprisingly not to Marion, but to Robert. How does a Norman noble, raised in the Christian faith, really cope with the idea of his own divinity? Do any of them -- Robert, Marion, or even Friar Tuck -- really understand that the God must continually die and be reborn, even as His Goddess endures? And finally, what happens when the God has chosen poorly, and His Son -- for whatever reason -- is simply incapable of fulfilling the rôle He has been called to play?

Thus was "Blood Ties" born. While some of the words may be uncomfortable to hear, they are my words, and they speak to truths integral to my life and faith. Approach them with an open mind and an open heart, and if this bard has done her job, perhaps they will touch at least a spark of truth in your own life.

Blesséd be.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Lisa M. Mudano". The signature is written in dark ink and includes a stylized flourish at the end.

"Blood Ties"
(By Lisa Mudano)

And the Hooded Man shall come into the forest, there to meet with Herne the Hunter, to be His Son, and do His bidding...

"I refused it at first, you know," the young man told his companion. It was late July -- high summer in Sherwood -- and Robert and Tuck had stolen away from the rest of the outlaw band for an hour of fishing and quiet conversation. "Refused Him, I mean."

"Herne?" the monk mused, playing his line with a master's touch.

Robert nodded, studying the play of sunlight on the dancing waters of the river. His pole lay beside him, abandoned in the wake of his mood. "I am Herne the Hunter," He told me, 'and you are a leaf driven by the wind.' I didn't understand what he meant at first." He absent-mindedly ran a hand through his wheaten hair, chuckling at the memory. "And when I did, I didn't want any part of it. Robin Hood and everything he stood for were things for Saxon minds, Saxon hearts."

Tuck's line jerked, and pulled taut. Smiling slightly, the friar began the delicate task of reeling in his catch. "So what changed your mind? You didn't have to stay with us after we rescued Marion, you know."

Marion... Robert closed his eyes briefly, remembering the first time he'd seen her. It was at his father's castle in Huntingdon, one year after her pardon at the hands of King John. Contrary to what he'd expected, Sir Richard's wayward daughter had been the picture of Saxon gentility, dressed in a simple yet elegant gown of palest blue and white, her fiery tresses tamed beneath the gilded fillet of a noblewoman.

Only her fog-grey eyes had betrayed her pain as she passed among her equals, hearing their whispered insults and quiet, mocking laughter.

Softened by time, the cherished memory flickered, faded, and finally resolved itself into a sharper, more painful recollection of the last time he'd seen his lady. Thinking him dead in the circle of Rhiannon's Wheel at the hands of the vicious Sons of Fenris, she'd sought solace from her grief within the Church. "Let me live in your heart," she'd begged him that horrible afternoon so many months ago, "but let me go."

Unable to deny her any request, he'd done so, riding away alone from Halstead Abbey.

"I don't know," he admitted at last, responding to the question. "A sense of belonging to something deeper than myself. The hope I saw in people's faces." He indicated Tuck. "The trust you people placed in me for the sake of a cause larger than Saxon and Norman combined."

"You gave up everything to join us," the monk reminded him. "How could we not trust you, in light of that?"

Robert laughed. "Will would've liked to try."

Tuck cracked a smile. "Will Scarlett would have trouble trusting Christ Himself at first meeting. Don't believe for an instant that his surly nature is aimed specifically at you. Even Robin, much as we all loved him, butted heads with Will on more than one occasion."

Silence fell briefly at the mention of Robert's predecessor. While he'd lived, Robert had known that first Lord of Sherwood Forest only by reputation. Upon coming to live with the outlaws he now called his family, he at times imagined he could feel Robin of Loxley's ghost dogging every step he took. "Did Loxley choose to die, Tuck?" the young man asked at last.

"You'd have to take that up with Marion or Much, lad," the monk replied. "I wasn't there."

"Much says he wasn't, either -- not for the end, at any rate. The story he tells is that Loxley sacrificed himself so Marion and Much could escape from the Sheriff."

Tuck chuckled softly. "And God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son..."

Robert looked up sharply, struck by the way the friar phrased the familiar Bible verse. "What

did you say?"

"Oh, nothing," Tuck replied as his fish finally sprang free of the river, to dangle in the warm, heavy air. "Just some...food...for thought."

* * * * *

Sir Richard of Leaford was dead.

Unlike the time he'd been presumed dead in Palestine some years before, there was no disputing his condition now. Pages, squires, and half a dozen or more men-at-arms all witnessed his fall from his favourite destrier as that faithful horse stumbled while chasing down an errant hunting dog. He struck the ground with such force, and at such an angle, that many of his retainers fancied they could hear the bones of his neck as they snapped.

Word of the accident spread quickly, causing immediate speculation in the minds of the Norman gentry as to the fate of the four hundred acres of land comprising Sir Richard's holdings. While Sir Richard himself had been well-loved, it was known the length and breadth of England that his only surviving blood heir was his daughter Marion -- she who was wife to the notorious outlaw Robin Hood. This realization, coupled with the knowledge that English law could not prevent that daughter from claiming her inheritance, struck a chord of fear in the hearts of many.

Two such people were the High Sheriff of Nottingham, Robert de Rainault, and his brother, Abbot Hugo. Even as Sir Richard's friend and liege lord Earl David of Huntingdon sent men-at-arms to retrieve Marion from Halstead Abbey, the two brothers paced the Sheriff's Great Hall in Nottingham Castle, trying to conceive a plan that would land control of Leaford Grange in their clutches once again.

"My sources say the girl's been in Halstead Abbey this last year, Hugo," the Sheriff said. "How hard could it be for you to order her removed from there?"

"Removing her from the abbey doesn't get us what we want, Robert," Hugo whined, collapsing on a bench. "We still won't have the land."

"No," the Sheriff had to agree. "Even on the outside hope that we could trick her into ceding the title to us, the Earl of Huntingdon would simply declare the agreement null and void. Unless..." He paused briefly, turning an idea over in his mind. "Damn! It's too bad she's married to that wolf's head. I don't suppose there's any way to annul the marriage?"

Hugo shook his tonsured head. "Not if it was performed by that outlaw friar of mine."

"Ah, yes," Robert sneered. "Friar Tuck. I frankly don't see why you just didn't have him excommunicated years ago. It would've saved us all a great deal of trouble."

"Of course, if he were dead..." The new speaker was Sir Guy of Gisburne, the Sheriff's steward. Despite numerous humiliations suffered at the hands of the man known as "Robin in th' Hood," he was still a knight of some renown, widely feared by the peasant folk of the Sheriff's domains.

"Easy words, coming from the likes of you, Gisburne," the Abbot snarled.

"Yes," the Sheriff agreed. "After all this time, I should think you, of all people, would have learned to hold your peace on that subject."

The Norman knight flushed pink with embarrassment. "But, my lord..."

Robert de Rainault waved him away. "Not another word, Gisburne. I want results, not promises. I want Robin Hood's head displayed on the gates of Nottingham Castle! Until then, I do not want to talk to you."

* * * * *

"I am here."

Heart hammering in his chest, Robert's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword Albion. "Who are you?" he breathed. There was a heavy dampness in the cave, and the air was cold, much colder than it should have been at this time of year.

And, instead of the Horned One, he found himself facing a female figure swathed head to foot in a dark, voluminous cloak. "Your words are familiar," the young man continued, taking an involun-

tary step backward, "but you are not the One I was looking for."

The figure raised a wrinkled hand to the heavy cowl she wore. "You may call Me Cerridwen." A single push sent the hood spilling back, revealing a face of immeasurable age and wisdom. "And I am the One you were seeking, son of Herne."

Cerridwen. The name was one Robert had heard whispered from time to time in the villages surrounding Sherwood. He'd asked John about its significance once, only to be told that it was a thing best left to women. He took a deep, steadying breath. "How can I assist You, Mistress?"

Cerridwen laughed. "Assist Me? So solicitous, son of Herne. Time will tell if it is enough." She sobered, and Robert could not suppress a shudder of fear. "What I want from you now are answers. Why have you resisted taking Marion as your consort?"

The question caught him entirely by surprise. "I had every intention of marrying her," he replied. "I have loved her since the moment I saw her. The refusal was hers."

She scowled. "Marriage, faugh! I do not speak of marriage."

Despite himself, the young man coloured slightly. "Are You implying I should have...?" His voice trailed off, unable to continue the thought with a woman old enough to be his mother.

"Remarkable," Cerridwen commented, shaking Her head at his embarrassment. "After all you have seen, and after all you have learned, you still hold fast to your Christian ways."

"Marion is a decent Christian woman," Robert stammered. "I would never dishonour her..."

"And the land suffers for your Christian ideals!" Cerridwen retorted. "Enough. Harping on past transgressions will yield no solutions. Show Me Albion."

Still puzzled, he did so, balancing the blade lightly across his palms. She moved closer to him, and it was all he could do to hold his ground.

"This sword," She told him, reaching out a hand, "represents a most holy and sacred trust. Its function is to act as the scales upon which all good and evil must be balanced if Order is to prevail." Before he could stop Her, the Crone closed a hand firmly around the blade.

"You have violated the trust, son of Herne, by your cowardice and your ignorance. From this moment on, you wield Albion at your own risk." She withdrew Her hand, leaving behind a dark smear of blood. "It will now do whatever is necessary to restore the balance. Search in your heart. Do the same."

* * * * *

"Marion, it's time..."

Head bowed low, the young woman kneeling at the prie-dieu crossed herself, her whispered "amen" barely audible in the still air of the chapel.

Ignoring the knight in Huntingdon livery whose shadow filled the doorway, Mother Heloise went forward to help Marion to her feet. "Child, you do not have to do this," she reminded her.

Marion smiled gently, shaking her head. "Yes, Mother, I do. The past year here has yielded no solutions to my problems. Maybe out there, I can find the answers I need." Pulling up the hood of her cloak, she turned to face the Earl's knight. "I am ready." Bowing low in acknowledgment, the man stepped aside to let her pass.

The sun was low in the west as the small party rode away from Halstead. The mundane novelty of riding again quickly wore off, to be replaced by the chilling reality of her situation. The news of her father's death had been difficult to hear -- and until she actually saw his body laid in the earth, she knew she wouldn't believe it to be true. *They lied about his death once before...* But she was not entirely certain whom she meant by "they."

I am Mistress of Leaford now... Given the fact of her own questionable legal status, she had long ago resigned herself to seeing her estates pass into other hands when her father died. The fact that Earl David was apparently willing to let her claim her inheritance opened up a world of possible futures.

She was so lost in thought that she nearly missed the signal for the party to halt. "What's go-



ing on?" she asked the young woman who rode at her side. Ever concerned with propriety, the Earl had sent a lady-in-waiting with his knights, to look after Marion and be a companion for her.

"I don't know," the woman replied. She'd exchanged barely two civil words with Marion since leaving the abbey, and her annoyed expression clearly illustrated what she thought of her current duties.

Sighing heavily, Marion spurred her horse on to where the captain of her escort stood hotly debating some issue with one of his subordinates. All around her, men were beginning to dismount. She cleared her throat in an effort to gain the commander's attention. "Captain?"

The knight turned. "My lady?" he queried respectfully.

"What's wrong?" she asked, bringing her horse up alongside his. "Why are we stopping?"

"Because it will be full dark soon," he told her, "and only a fool would travel into that accursed forest at night." He gestured behind him with a sweep of one mail-clad arm, and she saw the looming tangle of trees that heralded the beginnings of Sherwood Forest.

Her pulse quickening at the thought of Robert, Marion forced herself to look away from her former home, and back at the knight. "Then you must consider us fools, captain." As he opened his mouth to protest, she waved him to silence. "Sir, you forget who I am. Whether you choose to ignore my past out of ignorance or out of kindness does not change the truth of it. We ride on."

* * * * *

Marriage...

While the Sheriff had been the first to voice the possibility as the means to a very profitable end, marriage to Marion of Leaford was a subject to which Gisburne had devoted a great deal of thought over the past months, ever since he'd realized that the man currently leading the outlaws in Sherwood was not the one who had led them from the beginning. Life in the woods had given Sir Richard's free-spirited daughter a strength of will and independence alien to most women of her class, and her marriage to the late Robin of Loxley had ruined her for the dynastic match to which she was entitled -- placing her hand well within the hopes of the bastard son of a minor nobleman.

"If I can overlook the resulting damage to my social standing..." Gisburne mused, smiling at the thought.

Also in his favour was a popular misconception voiced by the Sheriff himself. One of Gisburne's informants in Wickham, a weak-willed peasant, had revealed that, while the banns of matrimony had been announced nearly a year ago for Marion of Sherwood and Robin in th' Hood, no legal Christian marriage had ever been contracted. *A few more days, to avoid interfering with any betrothal from that time,* he thought, slowing his horse to a trot, *and Marion will be mine.*

* * * * *

"And you say they were headed for Leaford?" Robert asked, idly stripping bark from a birch twig.

Much nodded. "That, or Huntingdon," John told him. "Short of following them most of the way, we couldn't tell for sure."

Robert scowled, unable to shake the memory of his meeting with the Crone. "I don't like it. Why is my father sending men to bring Marion out of Halstead? Did she go with them willingly?"

Little John shrugged. "Seemed to be."

"Of course she was with them willingly," Will growled. "Marion knows these woods as well as any of us. Better than some," he added, with a pointed glance at Robert. "If she really was a prisoner, travelling through Sherwood at night would be the perfect opportunity for her to get away. No," he continued, getting to his feet, "she's right where she wants to be, all right. I, for one, say good fortune to her with it."

"And there's Gisburne to consider, as well," Friar Tuck reminded them before heated words could erupt between Robert and Will.

"Aye," John agreed. "Riding like the Sons of Fenris were after him again, he was."

"One thing doesn't make sense," Much offered. "Why would Gisburne ride towards Huntingdon? He and the Earl hate each other."

"Maybe he's not," Will replied. "Maybe he's going to Leaford, too."

Lost in his own thoughts, Robert glanced up sharply at that. *The land suffers for your Christian ideals...* Cerridwen's words ran through his mind again. "Obviously, something has happened at Leaford," he said. "Quite probably to Sir Richard. No matter what else is going on, Marion will be there. And her safety is my first concern."

* * * * *

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Marion and her escort reined in at the gates of Leaford Grange. "The Lady Marion of Leaford craves audience with the Earl of Huntingdon," one of the squires announced to the bleary-eyed guards who met them.

Marion of Sherwood, she corrected mentally. After so many years, the name of her childhood sounded strange to her ears.

Get used to it, she ordered herself, swinging down from the saddle before any of the squires could help her. *Barring some incredible turn of events, Marion of Sherwood is dead,* she realized. *Best to leave that life behind now.*

Nothing is ever forgotten... The silent voice from her past brought tears to her eyes.

"My lady?" The voice, so close to her ear, made her jump; it was one of the Earl's men-at-arms. "My lady, are you all right?"

She nodded, brushing the offending moisture from her dark grey eyes. "The strain of the trip, my father's death... It will pass."

Bowing, he gave her a reassuring smile. "May I escort you inside? The Earl is waiting." He offered his arm, and, touched by his courtesy, she took it.

The Great Hall of Leaford Grange was nearly deserted as they made their entrance. The Earl of Huntingdon stood off to one side, engaged in a heated discussion with one of Sir Richard's pages. "The Lady Marion of Leaford," a herald announced.

She dropped into a curtsy as the Earl turned toward them, and winced at the stiffness in her limbs. In an instant, Earl David's hands were on her shoulders, lifting her up. "None of that, my girl!" he admonished, drawing her into a fatherly embrace.

She returned the hug gratefully. "It's good to see you, my lord. Are you well?"

"As well as can be expected." He grimaced. "I must confess, I had no idea how much work your father put into managing this old place. But, come..." He motioned her to one of the chairs at the long banquet table. "You must be exhausted! You didn't ride here directly from Halstead, did you?"

She nodded, holding up a slender hand to forestall his protest. "Don't blame your men, my lord. I insisted we continue on, against your captain's wishes."

Huntingdon's Earl chuckled. "You always were a headstrong one." He paused, as if unsure how to touch on a delicate subject. "Marion, concerning your status..."

"He wants to know whether or not you've taken any vows at Halstead," a voice interrupted from the opposite end of the hall.

Marion lifted her gaze to the new speaker, and nearly screamed. "Gisburne!" The sound was a hoarse, strangled gasp.

The Norman knight made a small bow. "Lady Wolf's Head." As always, the common slur took on new depth when spoken by the Sheriff's lackey.

Feeling trapped, the young woman started to her feet, only to be stopped by Huntingdon's hand on her wrist. "Wait, Marion. Answer the question, please."

"What is he doing here?"

"He arrived shortly before you did. Now, answer me, please." She shivered at the subtle edge of command that had crept into his voice.

"No vows," she murmured, jerking her hand from his grasp. "I am free."

The Earl's relief was tangible. "Good. I was afraid we'd have to bring Abbot Hugo in on this." He paused, a frown darkening his features. "Do sit down, child. We have important things to discuss, and I do not intend to strain my neck looking up at you while we do it." As she slowly resumed her seat, he glanced over his shoulder. "You might as well join us, Gisburne."

When they were both settled, the Earl sighed heavily. "Where to begin? You should know, Marion, that I have already been in touch with the proper authorities concerning a full pardon for you."

In spite of herself, Marion smiled gently. "Given my record in the past, do you truly expect a positive reply?"

"Given enough money," Gisburne said, "King John would forgive Lucifer himself a second time."

Huntingdon scowled. "Crudely put, but accurate. Once I pay the asked-for price, plus any coin the Sheriff demands for his forgiveness, your pardon will be granted. Everything will be forgotten."

"Your generosity overwhelms me, my lord," Marion murmured. "You are risking too much. I have done nothing to deserve your faith."

"A fact the King was quick to point out to me, I assure you. It is his belief, however, that a proper husband..."

She glanced up sharply, her mouth suddenly dry as she realized the reason behind Gisburne's presence. "You mean a proper Norman husband, don't you?"

Suddenly unable to meet her eyes, the Earl nodded. "That is his preference, yes. It is his belief that a proper Norman husband would help guarantee your loyalty."

"And, should I refuse?"

Gisburne smiled, leaning forward slightly. "Should you refuse, Marion, the agreement is nullified. You will lose your pardon and your inheritance." He paused, spreading his hands in an almost comic gesture of helplessness. "Without your pardon to protect you, you will be arrested and undoubtedly executed as a traitor to England."

She turned to the Earl. "There's one problem with your reasoning, both of you," she observed. "I am already married -- to your son, my lord. That is why I took no binding vows at Halstead."

Before the Earl could reply to her revelation, Gisburne began to laugh. "Would you lie to such a dear friend, Lady Marion? You and that wolf's head were only betrothed, never wed. You entered Halstead scant days after the banns were proclaimed, and you have remained there ever since." Smiling indulgently, he caressed her cheek with the tip of one calloused finger. "And while that betrothal is as binding in the eyes of God as a marriage, it is only for a year and a day."

"After which," the Earl concluded, "you will be free to marry again."

* * * * *

After much heated discussion and debate, Robert struck out for Leaford, taking only Friar Tuck with him. "It serves no purpose to put you all in danger when I'm not even certain what we're dealing with," he told his men.

"We know Gisburne's involved," Will retorted. "What more excuse do we need?" But, in the end, even he agreed to curtail his blood-lust and remain in Sherwood with the others.

"You're going to have to tell them, you know," Tuck reminded his companion once the two of them had left the forest behind.

Robert grimaced. "I can't think about that now. Too many other things are happening."

Reaching out, the portly friar grabbed the young man by the shoulder, turning him so they were face to face. "What's wrong? You've been preoccupied for days, and I don't think it's just Marion that's doing it to you, either."

The outlaw leader sighed heavily. "No, you're right, it's not." Motioning for Tuck to go on, he resumed walking. "What does the name Cerridwen mean to you?" he queried after a moment.

The monk shook his head. "You should've laid this at John's feet, or Will's, lad. Even Nasir probably knows more than me."

"She said things, Tuck. Disturbing things. She said the land was suffering for my Christian ideals. Then She accused me of breaking Herne's trust." His hand fell to the hilt of his sword. "And then, though I'm not entirely certain of this, She cursed Albion."

"Cursed Albion?" The monk was clearly doubtful.

Briefly, Robert described what the Crone had done. "She warned me that if I drew it from this point on, it was at my own risk."

"I would believe Her. Marion spoke to me once of encounters she'd had with a woman, a Maiden with the power of Herne."

"But this woman was ancient, a wizened old crone."

Tuck held up a hand. "Peace. I believe you. This much I know. The peasants who worship the Horned One also believe in the power of a Goddess. She has many names, and everything I've heard agrees that She has three faces -- a Maiden, a Mother, and a Crone."

Robert had to chuckle. "It sounds like the three parts of the Trinity. Cerridwen compared me to Christ." He sobered, and looked sharply at the friar. "Is that blasphemy?"

"From whose point of view?" Tuck replied.

* * * * *

Two nights later, as she lay awake in her bed, Marion was still no closer to resolving her problem than before. The condition laid upon the King's pardon left her with precious few options.

"If I walk away, Father's legacy is lost. If I defy Gisburne, Earl David, and ultimately the King, Leaford is lost, and I am executed..." She rolled over onto her side, striking at the mattress in frustration. "And if I follow my heart and send for help," she murmured, "my loved ones will be taken prisoner..."

"Always follow your heart," a voice behind her whispered.

She froze, suppressing a scream by sheer force of will. "Even if your heart leads you to hurt and pain?" she finally replied, tears welling in her eyes.

A hand reached out, and gently caressed her tumbled hair. "Better to risk hurt and pain than to never know the joys of love and ecstasy."

Unable to contain herself any longer, Marion turned, throwing herself headlong into Robert's embrace. Few words were spoken in the moments that followed, as the Lord of Sherwood was reunited with his Lady. Tears were spilled and kissed away; memories were reawakened at a touch.

"How?" Marion cried at last. "How did you know?"

"We didn't," Robert confessed. "Not at first. And we didn't know about Sir Richard until we arrived at Leaford. I'm so sorry. He was a good man."

She swallowed, brushing tears from her eyes with the back of one hand. "I know. It's strange. I thought it would be easier when I finally lost him for good. But it's not..."

Robert said nothing. Just holding her close once again was more than he'd ever hoped for.

Marion finally broke the silence. "Why did you come, then, if you didn't know I was in danger? I'd have thought, after all we said to each other..." She fell silent, unable to continue.

"A very wise old woman pointed something out to me," he replied. "You are my Lady, and the Queen of Sherwood. Nothing else matters, not while we draw breath upon this earth."

She inhaled sharply, searching his face for some sign that he still held her past doubts and

failings against her. There was none. "My heart never forgot you," she whispered, reaching up one hand to caress his face. "I was never able to make my final vows at the abbey, not so long as you still ruled my heart."

Smiling gently, Robert kissed her. "Get dressed," he said as their lips parted. "There's someone waiting downstairs who we have to see."

"Someone with whom we have unfinished business, I hope?" Marion's eyes were alight.

He nodded. "Something told me having Tuck along would come in handy." He paused, sobering. "I still can't promise you 'forever.'" Briefly, he told her of Cerridwen, and of the curse he felt the Crone had laid on him.

When he was finished, Marion was silent for a minute, reflecting on his words. "I cannot be afraid forever," she told him at last. "There is some higher purpose in my losses that I cannot understand yet. Until I do, however..." She leaned forward, and kissed him gently on the lips. "...I will be perfectly content with the happiness fate allows me."

* * * * *

Morning found Gisburne in the Great Hall, reclining in Sir Richard's high seat and nursing a tankard of ale. "Sir Guy of Gisburne, Lord of Leaford," he mused, casting a critical eye on his surroundings. "Not exactly what I had hoped for, but it should do nicely."

"You don't have it yet." The speaker was Earl David, attired in a fur-lined dressing gown of deep scarlet velvet.

The knight laughed. "Oh, come now, your excellency. I know you don't care for me, but I thought you agreed I was the best solution to your little dilemma."

Scowling, Huntingdon signalled to one of the hovering pages. The lad scampered off, only to return a few moments later with a platter bearing bread, cheese, an apple, and a steaming mug. Taking the mug in one hand, the Earl sat at the long table. "I agreed," he replied. "That does not mean I am happy about the situation."

"Well, then, perhaps I should leave." Gisburne's smile widened. "Of course, that means you risk turning Marion over to whatever riff-raff might come after me. The Sheriff, for instance, was discussing the possibility of marriage to her the very day I left Nottingham. All as a means to gain access to her inheritance, of course."

"And Leaford Grange means nothing to you?" Huntingdon scoffed.

"Oh, on the contrary." Rising to his feet, the knight started toward the table. "Leaford Grange means a great deal to me. It represents an opportunity to free myself from the Sheriff's control, a chance to prove myself his equal in the world. Having a woman like Marion as my bride only makes the victory that much sweeter." He stretched out a hand toward the apple still resting on the platter.

Both men heard the familiar twang of a bowstring, then a feathered shaft buried itself in the apple, scant inches from Gisburne's fingertips. Pale at the near miss, the knight drew a deep, shuddering breath in an effort to maintain control.

The Earl stared in shock at the doorway. "You!"

"I want Robin Hood's head displayed on the gates of Nottingham Castle..." The Sheriff's last words came back to Gisburne as he followed Huntingdon's gaze, knowing with a sick satisfaction just what he was going to see.

He wasn't disappointed. The familiar hooded figure stood in the doorway, flanked by Marion and Friar Tuck. "Foolish, Robert," Gisburne heard the Earl say. "You have finally condemned yourself to death. Marion, come away from them."

The young woman shook her head, drawing herself up proudly. "I stand by my husband, my lord."

"Damn it, woman!" His face darkening with rage, Earl David slammed the wooden table with his fist. "How many times must it be said? That man is not your husband! I know what you want, Marion, but all your dreams cannot alter reality!"

Reaching up with one hand, Robert let his hood fall back. "This is no dream, father. Marion is

my wife in the eyes of God, the Church, and Herne the Hunter."

Gisburne exploded. "Lies! My Informant told me no marriage was contracted between you...!"

Marion smiled. "...before I entered Halstead. Yes, Sir Guy, that much is true."

Huntingdon's gaze shifted to Tuck, and realization dawned. "You..."

The little friar shrugged, smiling. "I pronounced the banns. We thought it only proper that I perform the ceremony as well. Highly irregular, I know, but it's all terrifically legal." He chuckled. "And within the prescribed year and a day as well."

"He won't be her husband for long," Gisburne swore, drawing his sword in a single fluid motion.

It was Robert's turn to smile, unruffled by the threat. "And then what, Guy? You'll marry her?"

"That's right!" the knight retorted, starting around the table.

Tuck stepped between the two men. "No, that's wrong. Marion can never be your wife."

Gisburne laughed incredulously. "Oh? And who will stop me from taking her, friar? You?"

"I think what he is trying to tell you," Marion interjected, "is that, even if you kill Robert, or if you have him arrested and then executed, I can still never marry you."

"According to the laws of Mother Church, you see," Tuck informed him, smiling broadly, "you and Marion are consanguineous. Robert's death, while it may give you a great deal of satisfaction, cannot change that fact."

The Earl stepped forward at that, pale and shaking. "Robert, what is he talking about?"

"Lady Margaret," his son told him gently, toying with Albion's hilt. "Gisburne's mother. On her deathbed, she confessed to once loving a powerful Earl of the realm while her husband was lost on Crusade. The man eventually found his way home, back to his wife -- only to find that she had conceived a child that could not possibly be his."

"You lie!" Gisburne cried.

"In order to protect the man she'd come to love, and to salvage what little honour she could, Lady Margaret severed all ties with her beloved, and returned to her life with her lawful husband. She never told her lover that she bore him a son some nine months later."

Gisburne was trembling. "Me?" He glanced from Robert to the Earl, then back again.

Huntingdon swallowed. "I did love your mother once, Sir Guy. Many years ago, and in much the way you just heard. I swear to you, though... I never knew... It never occurred to me that the child she bore could be mine..."

Dazed, the knight set his sword down on the table. "My father...?" Turning, his eyes fell on Tuck. "Despite your treason, you are still a man of God. Do you swear this is so?"

The friar nodded once, his regret obvious. "I am sorry you never knew, my son."

Gisburne shifted his gaze to Robert. "All those years, they called me 'bastard.' I knew my father hated me, but I never knew why..." He took a few tentative steps toward his half-brother.

Uneasy at the sudden change in the knight, but heartened by the seemingly genuine regret in the older man's voice, Robert moved forward to meet him. "It's a heavy burden to bear. My men still wonder why I can't bring myself to kill you."

Gisburne smiled viciously. "I'm sorry I can't say the same," he whispered, lurching forward.

Before Robert could react, the knight's hand closed on Albion's hilt, and he jerked the sword free of its scabbard. Without pausing for breath, Gisburne grabbed his half-brother by the shoulder, and slammed the bright steel home between his ribs.

In that instant, everything around the two brothers seemed to shift into slow motion. "Foolish Robert," Gisburne hissed as they sank to the floor together. "You are nothing to me."

Incredibly, Robert smiled. "You restored the balance, though. Cerridwen...should be pleased... at the Irony..." Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and his breathing was stilled forever.

The knight sat back on his heels, letting the last vestiges of adrenalin wash out of his system. "It's over," he muttered, jerking Albion free. "The Sheriff should be pleased at the Irony. Automatically, he began to clean the blood from the steel, using Robert's homespun shirt.

"That sword is not yours."

Gisburne glanced up, a suitably scornful reply already on his lips. Marion faced him with her bow fully drawn, an arrow aimed directly at his heart.

"I mean it, Gisburne. Drop it now, or I let fly."

Despite himself, the knight laughed; there was a hint of madness in the sound. "You couldn't kill me to save the life of your lord and husband, my lady. Do you expect me to believe now that you will end my life over a length of steel?"

Her eyes were like iron. "His time had come. The Goddess cursed him... He was no longer mine to hold."

Gisburne started to his feet, shaking his head. "You're mad."

"Am I? What do the peasants call the Hooded Man, Gisburne? What do they always call him? Herne's Son -- chosen by the God to be His Instrument on earth. Christ died for HIS people, only to be born anew." She smiled. "Why not the Horned One's son?"

"Let's say I believe you, even for an instant. Where does this come in?" He hefted Albion.

"On the day Herne Himself calls you as His son, you will understand the meaning of the blade you hold. On that day alone, when you finally understand the forces that have touched your life, may you lay claim to Albion -- and, finally, to me."

* * * * *

"I still don't understand why you feel it necessary to leave." The Earl's protest, familiar as it was, still brought tears to Marion's eyes.

Reaching up, she touched the older man's cheek. "Search your heart, father. The answer will become clear one day."

Tears welling in his own eyes, Robert's father pulled her into a tight embrace. "Nothing is forgotten, my dear."

Snuggled against his chest, Marion swallowed heavily. "Nothing is ever forgotten."

It was two days since Robert's murder in the Great Hall of Leaford Grange. The Lord of Sherwood, heir to an earldom and the Huntingdon estates, had been laid to rest in a grove of oak trees. His widow had specified the place, although she refused to say why. Sir Guy of Gisburne had been ordered back to Nottingham, and to the Sheriff.

The estates of Sir Richard of Leaford would pass into other hands, but as she took a last look at the place she had called home for so many years, Marion knew she didn't mind. She had started to outgrow her childhood on the day a slender, forest-born creature had invaded her bedroom and charmed her with his innocence.

"*Today, I take my final steps,* she realized, drawing away from the Earl and turning to Tuck.

There were tears in his eyes as well. "Little flower..."

She silenced him, a gentle finger on his lips. "Peace, my friend. Go to them. Tell them everything that happened. Most of all, tell them not to lose hope. Herne will not forget them."

"But what of you? Where will you go?"

"Where I'm going is of no consequence. I have some things I must discover on my own. Just know that, when Herne's Son walks the earth again, I will find my way back to you."



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who some see as outlaws and outcasts even today

In loving memory of Maxwell T. Wolf,
Who will always be free, like the King of Sherwood

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